

Studying Literacy as Situated Social Practice: The Application and
Development of a Research Orientation for Purposes of Addressing
Educational and Social Issues in South African Contexts

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work, except where indicated, and has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.

Signed:

signature removed

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September 2005

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother Isabelle, and to my son Ben.

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I would like to thank my supervisor, Associate Professor Andrew Spiegel wholeheartedly for his support and commitment from the inception to the completion of this research.

Abstract

This is a study of the application in South Africa of a social practices approach to the study of literacy. A social practices approach conceptualizes literacy practices as variable practices which link people, linguistic resources, media objects, and strategies for meaning-making in contextualized ways. These literacy practices are seen as varying across broad social contexts, and across social domains within these contexts, and they can be studied ethnographically. I examine how this approach is applied across four critical themes of study in South Africa, namely: the uses and valuations of reading and writing by adults without schooling; the historical circumstances whereby literacy comes to be identified as a resource of European culture in colonial South Africa; children's early engagement with literacy in formal and informal contexts; and reading and writing in relation to electronic and digital media. I review examples of ethnographic research in each case, in which I have participated as a researcher, and examine how the approach has been applied, tested and modified in each case of its application.

The research in each case showed literacy's incorporation in complex and variable ways in situated, located human activities. Whereas the first application of the social practices approach, that of the SoUL project detailed how literacy operated as everyday practice amongst people with little or no schooling, the research lacked a theoretical perspective to explain how these practices came to take the form and status that they did, as regards the influences upon them from outside the immediate settings that were studied. Over the subsequent studies I developed a revised approach to the study of literacy which detailed the explanatory usefulness of studying how literacy practices that network across larger domains than the local have effect on the construction of local practices, in both historical as well as contemporary examples. Literacy practices were not simply the products of local activity but involved rather the particular local application of communication technologies, language and artefacts that originated from outside the immediate social space. However, local applications involved original, indeterminate and varied uses of those resources.

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Formative Studies in a social practices approach

Chapter One: The New Literacy Studies

Introduction

This thesis is a study of the application in South Africa of an ethnographic research perspective on the study of literacy, also known as the New Literacy Studies (NLS) or what I will mostly call in this thesis a social practices perspective. A social practices approach conceptualizes literacy as sets of social practices that are contextually embedded and situationally variable, rather than as an autonomous skill, practice or social technology whose forms, functions and effects are unchanging and neutral across social settings (cf. Street, 1983, 1995). The mode of research and analysis that is characteristic in research that draws on a social practices orientation to the study of literacy is that of the detailed ethnographic investigation of literacy practices (as situated social practices) in particular settings. It is an approach that does not take as a given the uses, worth and valuations of literacy in specific social contexts. Instead, it is concerned to study literacy as variable with regard to its forms, functions, uses and values across settings, and thus varying in its social meanings and effects. From this perspective literacy is a socially contested term, and it can be and is used in several different ways (Barton, 1994, 13). Each choice of how the term applies has social and moral consequences because such choice is shaped by particular values and interests. Each understanding or model of literacy, what it is and how it works, incorporates a tacit or overt theory about the functioning of power in and across social contexts (Gee, 1990, 27; Street, 1984). Rather than assigning universal effects to literacy and illiteracy, therefore, the research orientation I apply in this thesis is concerned to study, in particular settings,

1. what understandings people have of reading and writing;
2. what uses reading and writing have in specific circumstances;
3. what social practices give shape to these uses and understandings; and
4. how these relate to the wider dynamics of social relationships, including those of the production and distribution of things, and the workings of power and authority in specific contexts and across contexts.

The value claimed for this approach to the study of literacy is based on the argument that detailed ethnographic study can provide an understanding of literacy and its uses, functions, effects and acquisition processes in particular settings. Such understanding can be productively applied in educational and other societal settings. The thesis examines the capacity of this approach to provide productive explanations and understandings of key questions to do with reading and writing in South Africa, in selected contexts. My task in this thesis is thus to carry out and review particular applications of this approach to the study of literacy in a number of pivotal or telling contexts in South Africa. This work is carried out in a reflexive manner so that the individual studies themselves raise questions and challenges for the research orientation, and point to directions in which this way of studying literacy can be applied and developed in relation to particular contexts. In summary, in this thesis I am concerned to examine what the theoretical and empirical contributions are of a sequence of studies of reading and writing across multiple social contexts in South Africa.

In broad overview, in this thesis I set out to

1. summarize the conceptual roots and arguments of the approach to the study of literacy as situated social practice internationally;
2. apply this approach, and review its application, to the study of literacy in selected socially and educationally relevant sites of study in South Africa;
3. examine ways in which the conceptual and methodological resources of this approach to the study of literacy are challenged and can be developed by the research evidence that I examine;
4. outline an empirically grounded account of how literacy works as situated social practice, that draws on the analyses in the cases that I have examined.

Amongst the key aspects of social life in a South African context where social anxieties and pedagogical concerns related to literacy loom particularly large are the following themes:

1. the presence in South African society of very large numbers of people who received little or no schooling, or dropped out of school early.
2. the historical circumstances that produce associations with literacy as commencing as a resource of European culture in South African, and a concern with what the hegemonic effects of those cultural origins of literacy in South Africa might be.

3. concerns that very large numbers of children are not succeeding in learning to read and write effectively in South African schools as evidenced in the substantial rates of failure, non-completion and repeating of classes that are commonly associated with low development and retention of reading and writing skills.
4. the rise to considerable socio-economic prominence across the world of new communications technologies of computers and related communicative devices and digital networking resources, resulting in new kinds of reading and writing practices, and demands for effective instruction to prepare students and workers for engaging with these 'new literacies'.

A detailed application of a social practices approach to the ethnographic study of literacy that engages in turn with each of these four themes provides a broad frame for a substantial, located application, review and elaboration of the approach. I present and review studies that focus in turn on one of the four themes. I set out to argue that in each case the studies develop insights and analyses that make sense of particular issues of pivotal concern for that case. The studies also offer difficulties and challenges to the social practices orientation to literacy studies, which provide opportunities for the further elaboration of a social practices approach to literacy studies. The enquiry that drives this research can be expressed as follows: Does the study of literacy as situated social practice in South Africa have explanatory power to illuminate key social and educational questions across a range of contexts? What does such study show as to how such an approach to the study of literacy might be extended and revised, for further application to questions of social and educational relevance?

In the case of the first of the four themes listed above, I examine attempts at adult literacy policy development during the 1990s at the time of political transition from apartheid government to democratically elected government in South Africa. To do that, I review the work, methods and findings of the Social Uses of Literacy (SoUL) research project. That research presents the first sustained application of a social practices approach to research in South Africa and is thus pivotal for elaborating on and reviewing how this approach to the study of literacy both applies in one important case, and might be applied to other key sites of study.

The second theme that I address is an historical one. I ask what a social-practices, ethnographic, or ethno-historical orientation to the study of literacy in South Africa can show as regards the historical origins, spread, and social embedding of reading and writing practices. I study

examples of records of historical interaction and processes in pre-colonial and colonial settings that involve reading and writing, and question in what sorts of ways to make best sense of those encounters, and the literacy practices involved. I contrast the explanatory power of this analysis with examples of historical studies that have drawn on what Street (1984) called an autonomous model, which understands literacy as working in particular and predictable ways, as regards its social consequences in historical perspective. I compare the respective claims of these approaches as regards their explanatory power, and with reference to the wider historical record.

Thirdly, I examine key questions to do with early childhood literacy from a social practices perspective, specifically questions of children's acquisition and development of reading and writing practices, and their application in schooling contexts. I draw on, examine and develop examples of ethnographic case studies of children's early encounters with literacy in school and out-of-school settings. I consider ways in which the ethnographic study of children's early childhood literacy provides a productive perspective from which to examine, make sense of and respond to the widely perceived failures of schools across South Africa concerning effective instruction in reading and writing practices. Again, I am concerned with subjecting to analysis and further elaboration a social practices perspective, with reference to the wider literature on children's early literacy.

The fourth and final theme I examine is the question as to what the study of literacy as situated social practice in South Africa brings to contemporary debates around the so-called “new literacies” i.e., the spread of screen-based communication modalities in the globalized knowledge economy (Snyder 1998, Lankshear 1997, Street, 1999). I draw on the social practices approach that I presented and revised over the preceding chapters to outline a conceptual framework and analysis of data. In contrast with much of the literature on these new literacies which focuses on their translocal character (for example, allowing immediate communicative interaction between people who do not share the same locale, and productive of ‘virtual communities’ of persons united in common activities despite their physical separation) I study the new literacies as *situated practices and resources* that are situated, developed and given effect in localized ways.

The thesis presents an analysis that is developed from the arguments and findings of a series of four located and situated studies. The range and variety of focus presented by the four cases provide multiple vantage points to assess and develop the research orientation, in terms of its capacity to frame research that answers questions of educational and social importance. Using a

'critical case study' format allows me to engage in a detailed examination of a social practices approach to literacy, with reference to key instances of its application in South Africa. The case studies are developed and reviewed here for three inter-related purposes: for their particular relevance to questions of educational and wider importance; secondly, for their contribution to the broader study of literacy as situated social practice; and thirdly, for providing the occasion for an elaboration of the model of literacy as situated social practice as regards its application in South African as well as other contexts.

The thesis draws on and analyses my published and unpublished work and the published work of colleagues who have collaborated with me on Literacy Studies research since the early 1990s. It also undertakes original analyses of ethnographic data collected in the course of some of those studies. More specifically, in the case of the first of four foci described earlier, (the uses and valuations of literacy by adults without schooling in relation to the construction of adult illiteracy as a policy problem), the thesis examines the methods, findings and contributions of the Social Uses of Literacy (SoUL) research project. This was an inter-university project which I initiated and directed between 1993 and 1996, and which resulted in a number of publications (Prinsloo and Breier 1996; Prinsloo and Robins 1995; Mpoyiya and Prinsloo 1996; Kell, 1996b; Prinsloo and Kell, 1998a).

In the case of the second theme, the historical study of literacy from a Literacy Studies perspective, I undertake a fresh analysis of specific historical instances of early and pre-colonial encounters with literacy in South Africa, for purposes of applying and reflecting back on my research model. The stimulus for this historical research was provided by the earlier SoUL work. During that research I encountered descriptions of family and social history (Mpoyiya and Prinsloo, 1996; China and Robins, 1996; Malan, 1996b) that suggested a complex historical experience in relation to literacy that I had not seen described in the available literature. Over two chapters in this thesis I analyse a selection of primary and secondary material that deals directly and indirectly with historical constructions of literacy and illiteracy in South Africa, and focus on specific in-depth instances of encounters with literacy in cross-cultural contexts. I draw on previously published (Prinsloo, 1999a) and unpublished writing of my own (Prinsloo, 1996) as well as original analysis of data sources to develop this part of the study. I contrast the explanatory power of this analysis with that of historical research which relies on different understandings of literacy and its consequences. I am concerned in this work to address key questions as to how literacy came to have effect and consequences under conditions of western

expansion and conquest in Africa. In my interpreting of the data I am concerned to apply and elaborate on the conceptual resources of the social practices approach to literacy that were brought to bear in the SoUL study, as I describe them in the earlier chapters.

In the case of the third theme (the ethnographic study of children's early literacy learning), I draw on and examine data collected as part of the Children's Early Literacy Learning (CELL) research project. This is an inter-university research project that I initiated, from 2000 through to the present (publications and papers include Bloch, Stein and Prinsloo, 2001; Bloch and Prinsloo, 1999; Prinsloo, in press; Prinsloo, 2004; Prinsloo and Stein, 2005; 2004; 2003; Stein, 2002; Stein and Mamabolo, 2005; Stein and Slominsky, in press; 2001). For the purposes of my current dissertation I carry out fresh analyses of particular data, to develop a perspective on children's early literacy learning, uses and valuations from a social practices perspective. I am concerned to enquire whether these resources and methods of enquiry can be shown to offer routes to the understanding of key questions to do with widely perceived problems experienced by children learning to read and write in South African schools. I again expand on the conceptual resources that have been developed and applied in the earlier sites of study.

For the fourth theme, I draw on the analyses I have developed in the preceding chapters to address the problems that these new literacies raise for a social practices approach to literacy. I apply the conceptual resources of the revised approach to the study of literacy as situated social practice that I have developed in earlier chapters to the analysis of data on adults' and children's encounters with and uses of the new media of screen-based, computerized and networked Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in South African settings. I draw on earlier case study research on literacy practices in 'restructured workplaces' in South Africa (Prinsloo and Scholtz 2000, Scholtz and Prinsloo 2001) and examine recent and previously unanalyzed data on children's encounters with the new media by way of computers in schools in Khayelitsha township, Cape Town, that was collected as part of the CELL research project. My purpose is to outline in a preliminary way how the application of a social practices approach to literacy might be applied in a new and relevant context, as one example as to how this work might be taken forward.

As regards the structure of the overall study, this chapter presents a summary and engagement with the classic or foundational studies that established the social practices or New Literacies Study approach to the study of literacy. Chapters two and three develop an account of how these

resources were drawn on and further shaped by their first extensive application in the South African context, in the Social Uses of Literacy project. That work, which I have described above as constituting the first theme of my thesis can also be seen as a “second generation” application of the social practices approach, in relation to the “first generation studies” that I examine in chapter one. Chapters four and five present the second theme, that of the application of the social practices approach to the historical study of literacy. Chapters six and seven present the third theme, that of the application of the same approach to the study of early childhood literacy in school and out-of-school contexts in South Africa. If the first theme outlined above can be seen as the opening or foundational study for the social practices approach to literacy in South Africa, then these second and third themes outlined above can be seen as the next stage in my application and development of this approach. To the extent that these four chapters (chapters four to seven) follow on from, as well as apply and extend, the methodological and epistemological resources of the SoUL studies, they can be seen as constituting a “third generational” approach to the study of literacy. Finally, in chapter eight, I summarise what has been developed as regards the arguments, findings, and conceptual developments of the seven chapters, and set out to show how the approach might be further applied to a context, that of the study of the ‘new literacies’ of on-line screen-based communication in technologically-poor contexts in South Africa. That final chapter presents the fourth and final theme of the thesis.

Research ethics questions

The research carried out here has been undertaken with the permission and participation of the persons who were research subjects. Their identities have been protected where appropriate by the use of pseudonyms for persons and institutions. (In other cases the research participants have made it clear that they would prefer that their names were retained in the research, and their wishes have been respected where it was apparent that no ill results might befall them for being so named.) In several cases the data reported on in this study has been researched as part of a funded and contracted research study that has been published or is to be published. However, in each case there has been no constraint in the original contracted research on researchers making use of the research data for their own writing and research, including for research degree purposes. Two PhD studies and one Masters study have been written, and two PhDs are currently being written by research colleagues who worked on the SoUL or CELL research projects (Kell, 1994; Malan, 1998; Stein, 2003). All those research studies draw substantially or partially on the

research data from the SoUL or CELL research projects. Where I here draw on research colleague's writings and arguments in this study I acknowledge the source of such arguments. In some cases I report on and carry out fresh analyses of data collected by research assistants attached to research programmes where I was a principal researcher and research coordinator. In such cases I attribute the contributions of such research assistants. In one case, that of a workplace study (Scholtz and Prinsloo, 2001), I make brief use of data collected and reported on by a Masters research student whose thesis I supervised and with whom I wrote two papers presented at research conferences, and published one paper (Scholtz and Prinsloo, 2001; Prinsloo and Scholtz, 2000). In most of the ethnographic studies reported on in this thesis (Gibson's 1996 study of farm-workers that I discuss in the following chapter is the only exception) I have personal experience of the research site, by way of co-visits with researchers and research assistants, and have met and communicated with the key research subjects. In cases where the data gathered was in Xhosa or Afrikaans, I have managed the translation of such transcripts into English. (This translation work has been undertaken in most cases by persons who were not the researcher who collected the data. The translations were then checked by the researcher who collected the data against the original transcripts and recordings. They were also checked again for accuracy and appropriateness of interpretation by an independent language expert in Xhosa or Afrikaans.)

A mention about terms used in relation to groups of people in my study is called for here. I use terms such as Coloured without racist intention. The term refers to persons of mixed race, as distinct from Africans which refers to persons of Nguni- and Sotho-speaking origin; and Whites which refers to persons of European origin.

Foundational studies in the New Literacy Studies

I now go on to review and summarize the foundational conceptual and methodological orientation of a "social practices" approach to literacy studies, by examining three key studies that gave shape to this emerging field, those of Scribner and Cole (1981), Heath (1983) and Street (1984). These three studies were influential in giving impetus and direction to a wide body of work that emerged in the later 1980s and through the 1990s, including the work undertaken here. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole worked in the field of psychological studies, Shirley Heath in socio-linguistics and the ethnography of communication and Brian Street worked as an anthropologist. These multi-disciplinary resources set the framework for an inter-disciplinary

approach to the study of literacy as situated social practice. However, they were unevenly drawn on in the first application of a social practices approach to literacy in South Africa, as I show below. The socio-linguistic tradition with which Heath's work is associated, and the socio-cultural models of cognitive processes, of which Scribner and Cole's work is an important early example, were applied in a limited way in the SoUL work, which is the research project I start to describe and examine in chapter two. I draw in a more sustained way on the socio-linguistic arguments and conceptual resources, and on the socio-cognitive tradition and resources, in later chapters. I first review these grounding studies in the New Literacy Studies, and then go on to discuss their first application, in the SoUL research project.

1. The psychology of literacy

Scribner and Cole's (1981) work, *The Psychology of Literacy*, is a study of three distinct scripts and literacies, and their cognitive effects, amongst the Vai peoples in Liberia. The study engaged directly with then prevalent assumptions that the acquisition of literacy by individuals brought about specific changes of a cognitive nature (Goody, 1969). Scribner and Cole were strongly influenced by the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, translation into English of whose work, they were overseeing. They were among the co-editors of the influential English language version of Vygotsky's writings, which they called *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (Vygotsky, 1978). Concerned to elaborate on the social dimensions of cognition, Scribner and Cole drew on Vygotsky's claims that interpersonal/intermental (or social) processes are the necessary condition for the emergence of individual/intra-mental (psychological) processes. Luria (1976), a contemporary and colleague of Vygotsky, carried out a study of the cognitive effects of literacy acquisition by running tests amongst Russian persons who had learnt to read and write and those who had not. Luria reported significant differences in response to tests of cognitive processes across the two samples and concluded that these differences were a direct outcome of whether or not the research subjects had learnt to read and write. Luria's study did not distinguish between the cognitive effects of literacy in isolation from other possible causes of cognitive change, such as participation in schooling practices, and Scribner and Cole (1981) were concerned to distinguish between the cognitive effects of literacy as distinct from the effects of schooling and other social practices.

The Vai people in Liberia were known to variously participate in three distinct types of literacy with three distinct scripts. Vai individuals had varying experiences with an indigenous Vai script

and its particular social uses of letter writing and record keeping, with Arabic writing and the religious literacies of Islamic, Koranic schools, and with school instruction of reading and writing English. Some Vai people were able to read and write in one script, some in two of these scripts, and some were unable to read or write in any of them. Over a period of four years and follow-up work for several more years, Scribner and Cole, with research assistants, gathered ethnographic and survey-based descriptions of language and literacy use and also ran a battery of tests of Vai persons' cognitive, perceptual and conceptual processes, including tests for abstraction, memorization, categorization and verbal explanation skills, so as to study the uses and consequences of literacy in these three different scripts, languages and contexts. They were able to distinguish in their analysis between 'literacy effects' and 'school effects', and convincingly to show that the cognitive attributes previously associated with literacy, by Luria and others, were not products of literacy itself but were the variable outcomes of particular social practices such as schooling or urban living. The failure of literacy to yield consistent cognitive effects across all three scripts and literacies (and also the inconsistency of schooling effects on measured cognitive outcomes) led Scribner and Cole to conclude that "schooling and literacy are not synonymous" and that "literacies are in fact highly differentiated" (1981: 132). This made them question the tendency by many writers to "discuss literacy and its social and psychological implications as though literacy entails the same knowledge and skills whenever [and wherever] people read and write" (1981: 132). These findings were in direct contrast to Luria's (1976) earlier conclusions that major differences existed between literate and non-literate subjects in their uses of abstract reasoning processes. Applying Scribner and Cole's (1981) analysis, one sees that what Luria (1976) had taken to be the consequences of literacy were more likely a result of the communicative and cognitive strategies taught and acquired by way of specific schooling practices than a result of the acquisition of literacy in and of itself. In Scribner and Cole's (1981) study, the cognitive strategies that had been associated with literacy, such as the capacity to complete syllogisms of a general sort, were most strongly correlated with schooling or with exposure to urban life (and the associated discourse habits and cognitive strategies of those social practices) and not correlated with literacy at all across the three scripts and different languages. As an illustration of this point, syllogisms that Luria used in his study were such as: "In the far north all bears are white; Nomvaya Zemlya is in the far north. What colour are the bears there?" This question was designed to test whether persons could apply a particular logical procedure which involved applying knowledge to appropriate logical categories. In the case of research

subjects who had not learnt to read and write (at school) a typical answer to the question was along the lines of: "I don't know. You should ask the people who have been there and seen them". In contrast to Luria's study, Scribner and Cole argued that schools develop the abilities and habits of answering questions of a general sort, such as this one, which refer to contexts other than schooling. These cognitive strategies were learnt within particular systems of activity and did not follow from literacy independent of those particular practices of schooling. The unschooled farmers could not be accused of being illogical, as they provided justifications for their choices that were logical (to know the colour of something you would have to see it, and to see something you would have to be there with the animal. Since they were not there and could not see the animal they could not tell the answer). They could only be accused of not using a form of logic learned in school, and associated with particular practices and communicative traditions.

Scribner and Cole were, to the best of my knowledge, the first researchers to introduce the term *practice* to conceptualize literacy, thereby stressing the fundamentally social rather than individualized dimensions of literacy. They made the case that there was nothing special about literacy in general as regards its consequences for cognitive skills. Rather, as had been argued by Vygotsky (1978), cognitive processes had a direct basis in social activity. Their argument provided a key strand in the development of a New Literacy Studies approach to the study of literacy, and is widely quoted as early evidence in support of the social practices approach to literacy research. However, such a focus on situated cognition and on the socio-cognitive dimensions of literacy learning was not pursued in great detail in the first applications of the social practices approach to literacy in South Africa, which was more informed by anthropological influences. I examine later how this socio-cognitive perspective has been substantially developed since Scribner and Cole's (1981) study and applied particularly in the study of early childhood literacy. I consider how these methods, models, debates and conceptual resources might more effectively inform research in the ongoing study of literacy as situated social practices in South Africa.

Ways with Words

Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983) is a study of the communicative practices of three local communities in a South Carolina town carried out over a period of about ten years. Heath drew on socio-linguistics, particularly Hymes (1972, 1974) orientation to the ethnography of speaking. Hymes' work contrasted with Chomsky's (1975) focus on language as abstract

competence to be studied in abstraction from performance. Hymes appropriated, extended and socialized Chomsky's construct of competence, studying how meaning was produced through social interaction in specific contexts, and how what counted as *communicative competence* was specific to particular speech communities. Hymes (1972) focused on *speech events* and on *ways of speaking* as the broad units of analysis, rather than on the study of language in isolation of its practical application.

Heath (1983) shared this broader focus in her study, sharing Hymes's concern for the communicative dimensions of linguistic interaction. But, unlike Hymes, she was specifically concerned to understand the socio-historical context that shaped distinct communicative orientations, as well as to study how literacy was part of such communicative practices. In particular, she described how local communities had different rules for socially interacting and sharing knowledge in literacy events; and how these compared with expectations and rules for text-linked activities in the formal institutional setting of schools. Heath (1983) adapted Hymes' (1972) concept of *speech events* as the unit of study of language use within bounded *speech communities* and reshaped it to study the co-existing relationships between spoken and written language in particular settings¹. She identified the unit of analysis of her study of literacy as being *literacy events*, which were instances of communicative exchanges where literacy had a part, "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (Heath, 1983, 93; also in Heath, 2001, 319).

Heath's focus on distinctive local communities reflected her understanding that literacy and language use are profoundly interwoven with social organization. As regards the relationship between speech and text, she suggested that literacy events have social interactional rules which regulate the type and amount of talk about what is written, and define ways in which oral language reinforces, denies, extends or even sets aside the written material. These rules, she argued, vary across distinct cultures, local groupings, or speech communities. One example, in her study of literacy events amongst three distinct local communities in a town in the Piedmont Carolinas in the USA, is a letter that was received from the school and read collectively by neighbourhood adults on a house veranda in the black, working class neighbourhood which she called Trackton. Those present discussed the letter and a written response was collectively

formulated. This literacy event was characterized by a particular blend of text, talk and turn-taking in communication that was specific to the local community. For example, the intimate involvement of neighbours in the reading, discussing and replying to the letter was consistent with wider patterns of mutual child-raising which contrasted markedly with the other local communities in the study. Heath argued that the meaning of those events, and the ways that reading and writing was a part of that interaction, lay hidden unless one considered that the literacy event was contextually and culturally embedded. She paid close attention to the divergent orientations to literacy and learning that differing cultural and communicative traditions produced. While any 'literacy event' is one in which people and texts are involved in socially shaped activities, she argued, the ways of meaning of differently socially positioned readers/writers are non-equivalent. The consequences of textual interaction are not a product of the texts in isolation from their social context of use.

Heath (1983) found that children in the three socio-culturally divergent settings of the town (Roadville, Trackton and "the townspeople") were being socialized within their local communities and acquiring particular ways of using language and narrative in social communication which were incompatible with those of schooling in specific ways. As babies, children in Trackton (a working-class black community) were almost always held in their waking hours, and were constantly in the midst of constant human communication, verbal and non-verbal. Adults did not engage children as conversational partners in 'baby talk', where adults simplify their language, as was practice amongst the townspeople. Trackton adults did not sit and read to children and did not direct questions at pre-verbal children (such as 'Why are you crying?'). Adults chose verbally competent conversational partners (other adults or older children) and directed statements about the infant to them. Children were discouraged from answering the questions of outsiders. They were rarely asked 'What is X?' questions (Heath, 2001, 320). Instead they were asked analogical questions which called for non-specific comparisons of one item, event, or person with another (e.g., 'What's that like?') (Heath, 2001, 333). Though children could answer such questions, they could rarely name the specific feature or features which made two items or events alike. Trackton parents neither simplified their language for children nor labelled items or features of objects in either books or the wider environment. Trackton children learnt to

¹ Heath took the term *literacy event* from Anderson, Teale and Estrada (1980), whom she acknowledged as the source.

tell stories by rendering a context and inviting the audience's participation to join in the imaginative creation of the story. Children were encouraged to draw attention to themselves and to entertain by way of the display of particular kinds of associative verbal dexterity. Group negotiation and participation was a prevalent feature of the narrative performances of adults and children. Adults generally did not read alone but with others, and their reading was accompanied by talk about the reading.

Heath reported that Trackton children commonly had trouble in school, often failing to learn the content of lessons; they had trouble adapting to the social interactional rules for school literacy events. They did not respond well to direct questions of a school sort, as there was no precedence for this interactive pattern in their home settings. Their teachers ignored their developed abilities to metaphorically link events and situations and recreate scenes. By the time in their education, after the elementary years for the most part, when their imaginative skills and verbal dexterity could really pay off, they had failed to gain the necessary written composition skills they would need to translate their analogical skills into a channel teachers could accept.²

The working-class white children in Roadville, whose families had been mill-workers in the region for several generations were brought up into ways of knowing that were very different from those of the Trackton children, but were also incompatible with the communicative forms and practices in schools that teachers took to be the norm. Roadville was a religiously conservative (Christian) community whose children also did not develop the narrative habits or discursive traditions at home that would make it easy for them to learn to read and write in school-specific ways, or to make sense and construct meanings in ways regarded as valid in schools. This was in spite of the abundance of reading materials in the neighbourhood homes, in the form of magazines, newspapers and books. Roadville children reportedly struggled at school despite the high value attached to reading and writing, and Heath traced in fine-grain ethnographic detail the communicative practices into which they were raised. As regards early literacy experiences, children were read to from books that emphasized nursery rhymes, alphabet learning and simplified bible stories. They were encouraged to find a clear moral message in each account they read or gave. The stories they encountered were often tales of transgression, which

² Heath's argument here was supported in Michaels (1986) who showed teachers imposing a form of 'expository discourse' on those children who were used to a 'topic-associating' discursive style, rather than the topic-centred style that the teachers favoured.

stressed the norms of virtue and expected behaviour. They were discouraged from elaborating on accounts, giving perspectival or emotional readings, or fictionalizing real events, a practice associated with lying amongst parents who saw the Bible, for example, as containing literal meaning and guidance for every-day living. They were good at well-ordered practices, involving the keeping of time and space limits, and good at delivering factual recounts, as opposed to delivering interactive, intertextual or evaluative accounts. But they struggled with the kinds of perspectival, evaluative, decontextualizing and recontextualizing narrative practices that were valued in school, and generally struggled, as a result, to do well.

In contrast, Heath (1983) suggested, the way children grew up talking, communicating and relating to narrative and print in the middle-class homes of the middle-classes, both Black and White “townspeople” fitted them well for the practices of school and for the forms that literacy took in school. The advantages school literacy conferred on the children of these parents stemmed from its essential continuity with existing middle class literacy practices. From an infant age the children encountered the question formats that characterize so much of school interactive discourse (those of IRE, or initiation-reply-evaluation sequences, for example), labelling habits, fictionalizing practices, practices of relating book knowledge to real life experience, and such interactive behaviour as learning to listen and wait in response to particular cues from their parents and carers. They learnt patterns of interaction in relation to texts which prepared them for those of schooling. In particular, they were encouraged to take up positions in relation to the texts they were responding to, to present ‘accounts’ rather than ‘recounts’.

Heath (1983, 2001) suggested that teachers should find out more about the communicative practices and traditions that children from different socio-cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds brought to school contexts, and to treat children's language and social behaviour as manifestations of the rules of communicative competence they had acquired successfully in their communities. She argued that dichotomization between oral and literate traditions was “a construct of researchers, not an accurate portrayal of reality across cultures” (Heath, 2001, 339). Her study instead showed the culturally diverse ways of acquiring knowledge and developing cognitive styles. Trackton children were ‘disabled’ in the schooling context not because of any general, individualized cognitive deficit but because their practices of everyday life had initiated them into differing sets of expectations regarding intimates, non-intimates, and how they relate to one another, in speech acts and in reading and writing activities.

Heath's work crucially showed how a concern with communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) in socio-culturally specific and complex settings provided an elaborated conception of literacy that was of potentially great significance to studies in education concerned with understanding problems and challenges in literacy education. Heath's work made the case that there are multiple ways of taking and making meaning in reading and writing practices, and the selection of one of those ways as the standard or as normative in school and in formal institutions, means that for people whose ways are different to the norm, there is an ongoing struggle to legitimize their own practices or to accommodate to those of the standard. I will draw on and examine Heath's (1983) argument again in chapters six and seven when I examine what ethnographic study shows of children's in-school and out-of-school literacy practices in contemporary local settings in South Africa.

Heath's study has been influential in literacy studies, and in studies of early childhood literacy, in particular. Her methodological focus on literacy events as a unit of analysis has become a key resource for most ethnographies of literacy, though the rich socio-linguistic tradition that she drew on, associated with and following from the work of Hymes, has had only some influence on the social practices approach to literacy. The anthropological perspective brought to literacy studies by the work of Street, however, has undoubtedly had a major shaping influence on the field, as I now go on to show.

Literacy in theory and practice

In *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984) Street engaged with the theoretical and research literature on literacy in anthropology, where the invention, evolution and diffusion of systems of writing had been studied, in particular by Goody (1977, 1986). Street identified the influence in that work of what he called an 'autonomous' model of literacy, where the assumption was that literacy in itself - autonomously - had effects on other social and cognitive practices. Street argued that the autonomous model understood particular socio-cultural practices (western, essay-text literacy) as being socially neutral and universally applicable manifestations of literacy and its applications. Literacy was associated in the autonomous model with major technological advances that were assumed to make modernity possible. Street characterized the autonomous model as framing literacy in the context of an ideological celebration of Western constructs of modernity and progress, where literacy, regardless of context, was seen as producing particular universal characteristics and giving rise to particular good effects that coincided with Western

forms of social organization and communicative strategies. Implicitly, in the autonomous view, literacy did things to people, regardless of context, for example, enhancing their cognitive functioning, enabling them to be detached and to develop a meta-cognitive understanding or rational outlook that was crucial for progress. For Goody (1977, 1986), Havelock (1963, 1982) and Ong (1982) literacy was a crucial social technology that was at the base of the shift from traditional to modern mindsets, so that literacy became associated with 'modernization', 'progress' and economic rationality.

In Goody's (1976) analysis, dynamic literate cultures could be distinguished from conservative oral ones, as well as from cultures and societies where "restricted" versions of literacy were at work (in India, China and in Arab countries, for example). In societies where restricted literacy pertained, these restrictions did not allow literacy's transformative social potential to do its work in producing modern, progressive and industrializing societies. Street argued, in disagreement with Goody, Ong and Havelock, that the relationship of writing to language and then to thought, was different in different contexts and also varied according to the technical nature of the writing itself - for example whether it is phonetic or ideographic. There could not therefore be any general arguments about the effects of the introduction or presence of writing. Claims about the autonomy of literacy, as a critical factor in social evolutionary processes, reduced it to a 'technology of the intellect' in a way that was mechanistic and determinist. Goody, Havelock and Ong understated the quality of oral communication, Street argued, and exaggerated the distinctiveness and separation of spoken and written communication. Street further argued that the characteristics of storage, 'indirectness' and the construction of successive layers of historically validated meanings, which Goody attributed to literacy alone, were part of the intellectual framework of any society. Theories about a 'great divide' between literacy and orality, and between literate cultures and oral cultures, said Street, reduced the rich diversity of socio-cultural life-forms to a one-dimensional scale, and took one version of literacy to be the standard in a way that was ideological and biased. Street proposed, instead, an *ideological model* for the study of literacy, which addressed the ways in which people use and value reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, he argued, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always 'ideological', in that they are always rooted in a particular world view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others. Responding to Heath's (1983) work, Street (1984) suggested that the 'literacy event' as the unit of analysis in empirical studies should

be expanded to connect with the analytical concept of 'literacy practice'. He made the suggestion in order to draw attention to the wider framing of such 'literacy events' as social practices influenced by the already shaped dispositions of the actors. For example, actors bring to each literacy event those understandings about and orientations towards literacy (the social practices of reading and writing) that they already hold, and those actors' models are both brought into play and get confirmed (and sometimes modified) through the interaction which constitutes the event. Such literacy practices can then be seen as being embedded in wider social commitments, which give shape to the interactive dynamics of the participants in the literacy event.

Street's basis for engaging with the 'autonomous' model of literacy, as he identified it, lay in the ethnographic research he conducted in the 1970s in North East Iran, in fruit-growing villages, especially the village of Cheshmeh, near the city of Mashad on the border with Afghanistan. This was during the time of the national, UNESCO-backed "Holy War against Illiteracy", which was a key part of the modernising agenda of the Shah, which included the Sepayeh Danesh or the Shah's 'Army of Knowledge'. Street found various literacies being used in everyday life by people who were otherwise regarded as 'illiterate', particularly by literacy campaigners associated with the national literacy campaign. Literacy taught in schools thus turned out to be only one of the literacies that people drew on in the village, and school literacy had a less than dominant role in the village because the other literacies were part of the everyday social practices of influential villagers.

Besides school literacy there were the literacy practices associated with Koranic schools or maktab concerned with the Islamic religion. Those who had influence in village life were not those who had attended school but those who had attended the maktab. Maktab students learnt the Koran primarily by rote, in Arabic, but the mullahs (religious leaders and teachers) would also sometimes add commentaries and also teach vernacular literacy and numeracy (Street, 1984, 133). Some students in the maktab extended their literacy learning in Arabic from the maktab to reading and writing in the Farsi language, and mullahs would sometimes draw on commentaries on the Koran written in Farsi and also had Farsi versions of the Koran. The stereotype of Koranic literacy instruction is that it is not proper literacy because it is simply memorization of passages, but Street found interesting variety and complexity instead. The texts were differently organized on the page compared to western linear writing, the writing was inserted in different forms, angles and in varying relationship with other units of text, so that students learnt that reading is

not just about language written down, but that organization of text also carried meaning in particular ways.

In Street's (1984) study of the everyday literacy events and practices in the village, he noted that the marketing of fruit for sale to the town led to the growth of a *tajer* or dealer class who bought fruit from their fellow villagers and sold it elsewhere. These dealers developed a system of written organization and record keeping, including the labelling of crates of fruit, the making out of bills, and the signing of checks and other records of contract. The *tajers* had all been educated in the maktab and adapted the reading and writing practices they had learnt there to develop what Street called a market literacy. Bills of sale were filled out, names, quantities, accounts, places, times and dates recorded and cheques written. Street identified this as a third literacy practice and noted that this market literacy grew out of the maktab literacy practices, rather than out of school literacy, because of the greater exposure by men of influence in the village to *maktab* literacy. The social authority and knowledge of the older men, linked with their Koranic literacy, facilitated this new literacy, whereas school literacy taught in the Dabastan or state school was relatively new, and younger people lacked authority in the village. Street (1984) drew the conclusion that the take-up and influences of particular literacies is not a function of the inherent efficiency at a generalised level of one literacy against another. Rather, the status and take-up of one literacy rather than another is influenced by the relative status and influence of the wider social practices within which such literacies are embedded.

Despite the complexity of the literacy practices that Street (1984) identified in Cheshmeh, the view of outsiders, including literacy campaigners, was that the villagers were illiterate and living in the dark; that Islamic learning was merely rote learning - mindless, uncritical and backward; and that without the literacy of standardized instruction, they would remain in cognitive, social and cultural deficit. In contrast, Street noted that the people in the village might well have failed tests for literacy, developed with schooling models in mind, and yet they were using reading and writing on a regular basis, in situated and appropriate ways in that setting. Standards for literacy locally were a function of local practices, and a test run by outsiders would not reflect that. "If these complex variations in literacy which were happening in one small locale were characterised by outside agencies - State education, UNESCO, literacy campaigns - as 'illiterate', might this also be the case in other situations too?" Street (2001, 6) asked.

Street concluded that the then dominant assumptions about literacy, both in development circles and in academic discourse, were wrong, in that they treated literacy as unitary, and as an independent variable that could be applied with predictable effects across contexts with predictable consequences for social progress, cognitive development, democracy and economic take-off. For example, modernization economists attempting to quantify literacy's developmental capacity had claimed that a 40 per cent literacy level was necessary for economic take-off, and 80% for rapid industrialization (Street, 1999).

In contrast to the autonomous model of literacy, Street (1984) proposed a new understanding of literacy that would take notice of the richness and complexity of everyday literacy, even amongst those people conventionally classified as 'illiterate'. He argued that there were variations within literacies; that literacy, like language generally, is always shaped by its social contexts; and that it should therefore be studied with attention to the specificities of those contexts, particularly as regards contests over resources and meanings that characterize instances of social interaction. Street emphasized the political and variable dimensions of literacy in social practice, the historically contingent, socially relational and politically contested dimensions of literacy as a social practice characterised at least partly by indeterminacy in social relations. Literacy, in this sense, was always contested, both in its meanings and its practices. Particular versions of it were always 'ideological' in that they were always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others.

Finnegan's (1988) study engaged with the 'great divide' theorists of literacy and gave support to Street's criticisms. She showed the inappropriateness of various binary 'great divide' categorizations and assumptions, such as the claim made by Goody and Watt (1968) and Ong (1982) that literacy is a necessary precondition for abstract thought. Her detailed study of the Limba people of Sierra Leone showed that they had no use for reading and writing and only limited contact with Arabic literacy and Koranic schooling. She argued that the Limba had, amongst other things, a clearly articulated philosophy of language, stimulated by their contact with multiple neighbouring groups who spoke various other languages. In Ong's and Goody's analyses, described above, such a conceptual perspective on their own language was not available to oral cultures, where people lived in an unmediated relationship with their life-world, lacking the perceptual distance to analyse their own linguistic processes, a distance which literacy brought about. Finnegan provided evidence to refute such claims that literacy is a requirement for

getting a detached view of language and for the capacity for abstract thought. She found evidence of an extensive literature that was not written down, which she called an “oral literature”.

Street has continued to draw, refine and extend the orientation to the study of literacy as situated practices in specific contexts, as distributed amongst co-participants and as embedded within relations of culture and power. An edited volume of literacy studies in different cultures and societies (Street, 1993) brought together ethnographic studies from Africa, Papua New Guinea, the South Pacific, Madagascar, the USA and the UK, to show the rich cultural variation in literacy practices and to show the complex and culturally located links between literacy, identity and power. These studies again demonstrated that social practices around literacy vary, but more fundamentally that what is meant by the terms literacy, reading and writing differs across cultures and different settings. Street defended this work against accusations of irrelevance in its focus on “marginal societies” (McCabe, 1993, 5), identifying such criticisms as centralist and elitist (Street, 1996, 5). Street’s later work continued his earlier orientation, taking it into a range of educational and social sites of study.

'Second generation' studies of literacy as situated social practice

The studies reviewed above have been presented here, and are commonly thus described, as key formative texts for the study of literacy as situated social practice. Street's study and his subsequent work (e.g., Street, 1986, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1999s, 1999b, 2000, 2001, 2003) have been shaping resources for what became known as the New Literacy Studies (Gee 1990; Street 1995; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 1999; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996). I prefer to use here the less time-bound but more cumbersome description of this approach as a *social practices approach to literacy*, but I also refer to the New Literacy Studies (NLS) on occasion, particularly when referring to the earlier work in this tradition.

In his detailed review of the Literacy Studies field, Barton described Scribner and Cole (1981), Heath (1983) and Street (1984), reviewed above, as the 'classic studies' of the growing field (Barton, 2001, 93). In a related review of ethnographies of literacy, Baynham described those three studies as 'first generation' studies (Baynham, 2004, 285). Baynham's examples of 'second-generation' studies were those of Barton and Hamilton (1998), Besnier (1993), Kulick and Stroud (1993) and Prinsloo and Breier (1996). They are among a more extensive number of studies, that also include Bloch's work in Madagascar (1998), Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic's work in Lancaster England (Barton and Ivanic, 1991; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton and

Ivanic, 2000); Wagner (1993) in Morocco; Yates (1994) in Ghana; and Harries (2001) in South Africa; as well as studies from India, Namibia, Eritrea, Peru, Ghana, Bangladesh, China and Pakistan in Street's edited collection of ethnographic studies of literacy and development (Street, 2001). Other notable studies have included the study of the literacy practices of Seventh Day Adventists in Australia (Kapitzke, 1995), second-generation Hmong speakers in the USA (Weinstein-Shr, 1993) and amongst the Amish in the USA (Fishman, 1988). Indeed, Barton (2001a) has identified more than one hundred such ethnographic literacy studies that have been produced under the influence of a social practices approach to literacy.

At a conceptual and methodological level the work of Gee (1990, 1996, 1999, 199a, 2000, 2001, 2003) has been influential, in that he has developed key concepts which others have used in their analyses. In particular, Gee has emphasized the extent to which particular literacy practices are located in wider social discourses: a discourse-theoretical perspective has thus become part of an analysis of literacy practices, which sees them as always embedded in specific cultural, discursive exchanges and practices, and infused with the effects of power (Foucault 1972; Fairclough 1992; Gee 1991). Gee's (1991) theorization of discourse drew on socio-linguistic as well as sociological and social theoretical understandings of situated practice and identity. He defined Discourse as

a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network' or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful role (1991, 43).

Gee argued that there was no literacy learning without the accompanying acquisition of an associated Discourse (which he capitalized to distinguish his use of the concept from the idea of discourse as solely referring to a language unit). Gee's earlier work distinguished between primary and secondary Discourses. He saw all humans, "barring serious disorder", as becoming "members of one Discourse free, so to speak", which he called the "primary discourse" (1991, 44). He described this primary Discourse as "our socio-culturally determined ways of thinking, feeling, valuing and using our native language to focus in face-to-face communication with intimates". Beyond the primary Discourse, he argued, were the secondary Discourses of key institutions (schools, workplace, churches, official offices, etc.). The point about secondary Discourses, he argued, is that they involve interaction with non-intimates, or 'formal' interaction. Primary and secondary Discourses interpenetrate each other, similarly to the way that languages

affect other languages. For example, the primary Discourse of many middle-class homes has been influenced by the secondary Discourses of school and business. Gee thus addressed the relationship between spoken and written discourse, following earlier work in the New Literacy Studies (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Scribner and Cole, 1981), showing that this relationship is more complex than often characterised, for example that many ways of using spoken language in contemporary societies had their roots in written discourse. Gee was concerned to focus less on whether something was written or spoken, and more on whether it was part of a Discourse which used forms of language which were more specialized and more likely to be deliberately learned in institutional contexts other than family contexts, such as in educational, scientific and work contexts. These categories of primary and secondary Discourses have come to seem too broad, however, as it has become clearer, firstly, that discursive influences on family, popular and institutional culture are much more varied and interwoven in the multi-lingual and multi-cultural contexts that characterize so much of social space in contemporary times (Rampton, 1995; 1998; Hall, 1992; Prinsloo and Stein, 2003). In more recent work Gee (2001) describes *semiotic domains* in place of his earlier concepts of primary and secondary discourses, where domain members share a set of practices, a common language genre or register (what Gee calls a social language), a set of common goals or endeavours and a set of values and norms, but have their own individual styles and goals as well other affiliations. Membership of such domains is a far more fluid and provisional concept than those of primary and secondary discourses. Gee's (2001) examples of such domains include cellular biology and first person-shooter-video games.

Gee's point about the role of language and literacy as being manifest in specific social languages can be illustrated by his discussion of the following linguistic fragment, adapted from Halliday and Martin (1993, 77) and discussed in Gee (1996, 30-34).

Lung cancer death rates are clearly associated with an increase in smoking.

To a particular kind of experienced reader who is familiar with the arguments that smoking causes lung cancer and who is also familiar with a particular kind of academic and scientific writing, the one, clear meaning of this statement is unmistakable. But Gee argues that its sense does not at all lie on the surface, in its grammar. In fact, he says (1996, 31), it can be read to give "at least 112 different meanings!" For example, an outsider might read the statement as saying that nervous citizens are so worried about lung cancer that they are smoking more. 'Lung cancer death rates' could be a compaction of numerous, alternative pieces of information, depending on

how you parse the phrase. Also, 'an increase in smoking' might mean that 'people smoke more' or 'more people smoke' or 'more people smoke more'. The example makes the point that the sources of meanings in a text do not lie in the word itself but in the social matrix within which discourse is produced and understood. Meaning is embedded in a configuration of features that mark a genre or social language. These features are complex and are situated in a specific context where such broad social 'conversations' are already available as discourse patterns, available to readers as particular kinds of culturally situated models. Gee's point is that what is important in understanding and meaning-making is not words (oral or written) themselves, but the larger and specific sociocultural coordinations of which they are a part and in which they gain their significance.

A further influential body of 'second generation' work that has influenced my own is that of the 'Lancaster school' most commonly associated with the work of David Barton, Mary Hamilton and Roz Ivanic, who have studied literacy as everyday situated social practice across many contexts in and around Lancaster, U.K. (Barton and Ivanic, 1991; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 1994; Barton, 1994; Ivanic, 1997; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 1999; Barton 2001). From the study of literacy in everyday and institutional practices these researchers have moved into curriculum and into policy studies (Hamilton, 2001). The direction of their work has been to study literacy as complex, located human activities, rooted in the everyday social practices of people as they engage with other people, individually and collectively, with institutions, ideas, artefacts, categories, classifications, ideas and projects. They emphasise the concepts of 'local literacies' and 'vernacular literacies' to identify the situated ways that ethnographic study shows people engaging with each other and with larger social fields in relation to reading, writing and textually mediated social practice. An important analytic distinction drawn in this research is between *domains* and *sites* of literacy practices, where sites are the particular locus of literacy practices, for example, in homes, schools, local institutions or workplaces; whereas domains of literacy practices refer to those particular and typical ways whereby literacy is articulated in social, communicative practice at those institutional locations. So the home as a site might be a case where the literacy practices of the domain of schooling spill over and partly colonize the literacy practices at that site.

Freebody's work, together with Luke, has contributed to the development of a New Literacy Studies tradition in Australia and elsewhere. Freebody and Luke (Freebody and Luke, 1990; Freebody et al, 1995; Freebody, 1999; 2001; Luke and Freebody, 1997, 1999; Luke, 2004; 1998;

1994; 1992) brought to educational debates the New Literacy Studies' emphasis on literacy as a part of people's communicative and cultural practices. They argued that the teaching of reading and writing needed to go beyond an emphasis on decoding at the phono-grapheme level, and also beyond an emphasis on meaning making as a decontextualized activity. In Luke and Freebody's (1997, 1999) 'four-resources model', literacy is understood as a repertoire of four key practices -- as 1) code-breaking 2) meaning-making 3) using texts and 4) analyzing texts. Luke and Freebody encourage educators to think about how literacy is enacted and manifest in distinct ways in people's lives, and shaped by the dynamics of social power. They challenge educators to design pedagogies and curriculum that connect up with these real and situated uses of literacy, and to encourage their students to engage critically with socially and educationally dominant language and literacy forms. The four resources approach to literacy makes it clear that text use and text analysis are not dimensions to be left to later in schooling but that they are an integral part of learning to be literate.

Baynham's (1995) study drew on and developed the theoretical complementarity of socio-linguistic and socio-cultural accounts of literacy with regard to the interaction of spoken and written language that characterized the literacy events in his study. Baynham examined languages and communicative modalities in collective literacy practices amongst members of the Moroccan community living in London. He found that literacy events commonly involved both text and talk about text, and examined how meanings and practices were strategically produced with regard to these multi-modal forms of communication. Social networking practices allowed those individuals who did not have the requisite literacy or language skills to share in and draw on the range of competencies held by particular members of the Moroccan-London community when undertaking tasks such as form-filling or dealing with officialdom. Baynham studied the role that various community members played as literacy and language mediators in facilitating various kinds of social activities that involved literacy and bilingual communication.

Such studies have detailed the extent to which people live and act in a textually mediated social world, a fact commonly ignored by sociologists as Smith has argued (1990,1999). As Barton (2001) has indicated, this fact has previously also been ignored by linguists and socio-linguists who have studied language as face-to-face and spoken, rather than written as well. Research which sets out from face-to-face interaction through spoken language has had difficulty in addressing other aspects of social life which are mediated by texts. It has thus failed to take much account of the extent and the ways in which texts and textual practices influence social dynamics

in important and specific ways. Yet the ethnographies of literacy as situated social practice referred to earlier have provided evidence that much of social life is indeed mediated by literacy; in the organizing of everyday life, leisure and social participation, even amongst people commonly regarded as marginal, unschooled or illiterate. I return to this point in the review of the SoUL research and in the historical study in the chapters that follow. For example, I argue that much of the interaction between Europeans and Africans in pre-colonial and early colonial settings is textually mediated practice, in important ways that are often left unexamined in historical research.

Finally, it can be seen in a review of the wider literature that the social practices orientation in literacy studies that I have summarized here is one of a number of recent intellectual and research orientations in socio-linguistics, social psychology and linguistic anthropology which have turned towards interaction and social practice. These include, amongst others, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Goodwin and Heritage 1990; Schiffrin 1994) and related work in interactional socio-linguistics, where researchers have examined how meaning and social order are minutely constructed and reproduced in social and verbal interaction. Similarly, systemic functional linguistics and genre studies see language not as a unified whole but as a set of registers that differ primarily in the kinds of meanings they realize in particular social actional settings, rather than differing primarily in their phonology and syntax (Halliday 1978, 1994, Hasan and Williams 1996, Martin 1993, Christie and Mission, 1998).

A social practices approach to literacy also draws significantly on the sociological and anthropological writings of Bourdieu (1976, 1991), Giddens (1984, 1990) and others who have developed conceptual models for understanding human activity as social practice. Lastly, the Vygotskian tradition which emphasizes the socio-cultural and socially distributed dimensions of cognition, which Scribner and Cole (1981) drew on, has continued to be developed and to be drawn on by researchers (Wertsch, 1993; Lave, 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff and Lave, 1984; Rogoff, 1990; Wenger, 1998; Engeström, 1990, 1999; Dyson, 1993; Hull, 1996). I apply and further elaborate these conceptual resources in subsequent chapters. A further direction to which I return later is that concerned with the modalities of literacy. Kress and others have presented an understanding of literacy as being multi-modal in terms of the semiotic mediums through which it is communicated, where texts are not just products of language written down, but also get their meanings through other modes of semiosis, including visual, aural and other

modalities, besides written language (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Kress 1997, 2001; Gee 2001; Lemke, 1997; Snyder 1998; New London Group, 1996; Stein, 2001; De Souza, 2001).

The Social Use of Literacy research project that I present and review over the next two chapters was most influenced by the classic studies of the New Literacy Studies and by the ‘second generation’ studies that were then available. In subsequent chapters, where I apply and further develop the social practices approach to literacy, I draw on the wider literature mentioned in the preceding paragraph, and on the wider ‘second generation’ literature of the New Literacy Studies.

In the next chapter I present a detailed review of the first application of a social practices approach to the study of literacy in South Africa, that of the Social Uses of Literacy (SoUL) research project which was carried out in the middle 1990s, during South Africa’s political transition period from apartheid government. By starting with an examination of this study, I am concerned to examine the conditions of knowledge and foundational perspectives that were drawn on and produced particular accounts of literacy as situated social practice in the first sustained application of this approach to the study of literacy in South Africa. The studies that follow this review and examination of the SoUL studies are concerned to elaborate on, revise and develop the resources employed there, so as to sharpen them for further and differently focused work in literacy studies.

First application of a social practices approach to literacy in South Africa

Chapter Two: The development of a research orientation in the study of literacy as situated social practices in South Africa

This and the following chapter address a developmental question about the social and individual consequences that ensue from the presence in society of a number of people who have spent little or no time at all at school as children. Policy and practitioner discourses in adult education, produced by multi-lateral agencies such as UNESCO (Bhola, 1984), and by government agencies in South Africa (National Training Board, 1994; African National Congress, Education Department, 1994) have, in the past¹, commonly described *adult illiteracy* as a substantial social problem in South Africa as well as across Africa and claimed that it needs to be addressed by well-directed programmes of intervention. I ask what a social practices perspective on these issues brings to this claim, arguably one of importance in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa. I further enquire what the sustained application of a social practices approach to the study of literacy in this case shows as to the productiveness of the research orientation. This is the first stage in an analysis of what that methodological and epistemological orientation can bring by way of the study of the uses, values and applications of literacy across a number of socially important sites.

In this chapter I develop an account of the educational, political and intellectual circumstances that preceded the first sustained application of a social practices perspective to research into literacy in South Africa. I give an account of the circumstances that gave rise to the development of a certain kind of research project that attempted to answer major policy-type questions. My objective is to examine how the literacy practices of people who were commonly thought to be on the wrong side of the literacy/illiteracy divide came to be the major focus of a study which attempted to answer an important policy question in education and social development, namely, how an incoming democratically elected government should respond to a perceived illiteracy crisis in South Africa in the middle 1990s. My central task in

¹ It is notable that UNESCO has in recent times started to reflect on the arguments of the New Literacy Studies/ social practices approach to literacy, and to publish studies which are explicitly located in that tradition, which has been openly critical of the way UNESCO previously described literacy in terms of the autonomous model of literacy. The UNESCO Education Sector Position Paper (UNESCO, 2004) entitled *The Plurality of Literacy and Its Implications for Policies and Programmes* takes on many of the arguments of the social practices approach, and references a selection of literature from the New Literacy Studies, including the work from South Africa that is my focus here (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996).

chapter three is to study the methods, experiences and arguments of the Social Uses of Literacy (SoUL) research project which set out to answer questions about the consequences of not having had extensive schooling for persons who were identified by policy-makers as illiterate, and who were the target of proposed, and, in some cases, existing interventive adult education initiatives. I am concerned to identify the key features of the social practices approach as it was developed and applied in this case, and to identify how this approach can be developed and applied to other important sites of literacy in South Africa.

The configuration of ‘the illiteracy problem’ in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s in South Africa

For purposes of analysis I first outline and examine three important moments in the conceptual construction, in intervention strategies and in policy proposals, of a population of adult illiterates as a target for intervention, in the lead-up to the initiation of the SoUL project. My purpose is to identify the shaping influences and dynamics that produced the particular construction at a policy level to which the SoUL research project was a reaction and a counter-intervention. These three moments were

1. The Freirean moment, non-governmental organizations and non-formal education;
2. The refiguration of the illiteracy problem: Adult basic education and Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET); and
3. The National Education Policy Investigation Report (NEPI, 1992) on models of adult literacy provision and further policy processes.

1. The Freirean moment, non-governmental organizations and non-formal education

Leading adult literacy non-government organizations in South Africa worked from the 1970s into the early 1990s under the influence of Paulo Freire's writings on adult literacy as political action in support of “oppressed” people. Word of Paulo Freire, his work and his writings, arrived slowly and circuitously in apartheid South Africa in the middle 1970s. The Rev. Colin Collins, an anti-apartheid activist, brought back a copy of Freire’s already locally banned *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972), hidden deep inside his suitcase.² Collins made 500 photocopies and circulated them, largely to anti-apartheid clerics and to ‘Black Consciousness’ activists connected to SASO (South African Students’ Organization) and the BPC (Black

² I was given this information by the Rev. Dale White in the later 1970s. Dale White was then an anti-apartheid activist, running and supporting intervention and training projects as Director of the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre at Krugersdorp, and a supporter of the Freirean literacy projects which were starting up around that time.

people's Convention). Steve Biko, the well-known student leader who was later assassinated, was amongst those who organized seminars to examine and discuss Freire's pedagogy - the 'metodo Paulo Freire'. 'Conscientization' was the key Freirean term which the Black Consciousness activists appropriated as a term to describe their work of ideological and political mobilization. Adult literacy projects influenced by Freirean ideas working in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s included Learn and Teach and its off-shoot projects such as the Adult Learning Project (ALP) in Cape Town, Use, Speak and Write English (USWE) and the English Literacy Project (ELP) in Johannesburg (Human Sciences Research Council, 1982; Prinsloo 1991b). I worked as project leader of Learn and Teach for eight years, and thus have first-hand experience of these dynamics. In particular, I wrestled with the application of Freirean pedagogy to the South African adult education context over this time.

In Freire's pedagogy, *conscientization* describes the process whereby people are encouraged by a facilitator "to analyse their reality, to become more aware of the constraints on their lives, and to take action to transform their situation" (Brown, 1987: 225). These initial readings of Freire struck a strong local resonance. His phrases spoke to local concerns and gave them an international, particularly Third World, dimension. Freire's methodological and conceptual orientations, as summarized in a paper I wrote, were as follows:

Education is not neutral. It is either for domestication or for liberation. There are two forms of education: banking education and education for liberation. The teacher can either be on the side of a system that is oppressive, or on the side of learners. The content of education can either be the lifeless transmission of a reified and imposed culture to passive and apathetic students or it can be a dialogue where the curriculum relates directly to the lives and concerns of students, so that the outcome is the growth of understanding and consciousness about what to do to *humanize* the world: Freire (1972: 61) described dialogue as "the encounter between [human beings] mediated by the world, in order to name the world". Freire saw people as overcoming oppressive conditions and remaking reality through a transformative praxis of action-reflection (adapted from Prinsloo, 1991a, 364).

Several Freirean projects started in the 1970s and early 1980s in the face of state opposition. They struggled to maintain viable classes over this period: their work was characterized by high dropout rates and limited evidence of teaching success.³ The 'metodo Paulo Freire' had instant appeal to anti-apartheid educators and activists, with its stress on learner-centredness,

³ I wrote a critical study of Paulo Freire for my Masters dissertation in 1984, and drew on this in subsequent published papers (Prinsloo 1991, 1991b).

politicization and democratization of learning, but its limits became increasingly felt in application. The Freirean method as it developed in South African literacy classes, was centred around, firstly, the generation of a discussion around a topic of passionate concern to adult literacy learners, stimulated usually by a drawing or photograph⁴ depicting a key event from people's life-worlds: "These representations function as challenges, as coded situation-problems containing elements to be decoded by the [learning] groups with the collaboration of the coordinator", Freire (1973, 51) wrote. After discussion and analysis which was intended to produce new levels of understanding and conceptualization of lived social reality, including the social nature of poor and oppressed people's 'personal troubles', one or more ('generative') words were selected that had been central to the discussion, and broken down into syllables. The learners soon learnt that, by substituting the vowels in each syllable with other vowels, they could make new words, and the development of a list of words built from the generative word was developed.

Freire wrote that the urban poor and the peasantry in Brazil lived in a state of 'naive consciousness'. He claimed that coordinated discussion about central issues in their lives would put them in touch with their existential reality, resulting in their moving on to a newly critical consciousness of the social dynamics that lay behind their experienced realities (Freire, 1972). This simple model of social consciousness and political awakening of the poor and oppressed turned out to be inadequate in application in South African conditions. Levels of political awareness and analytical capacities were generally high and diverse amongst the poor in South Africa, in the highly politicized climate that characterized late-apartheid South Africa. Members of learning groups, who were people who had not been to school or had only a few years of schooling, were also participants in social movements and local forms of organization, including migrant worker associations, some of them linked to the Inkatha political organization in Natal, to trade union organizations and also to Africanist, syncretist Christian churches, particularly the Zionist church movement. They generally held well defined but sometimes politically conservative views and were used to engaging in discussions where points of view were expressed. Free-standing adult literacy classes, in contrast to the other forms of social organization that people were part of, were not often appropriate vehicles for nascent social movements under the circumstances of late apartheid South Africa, particularly in comparison to the political, worker, religious and cultural

⁴ The drawing or photograph were what Freire called a 'code', in that it was a codification of a real situation that could be analyzed through dialogical exchange in the learning group.

movements that had influence. The early successes reported from the Freirean groups, particularly from Learn and Teach, which had a national profile at its peak, had to do with the often stimulating and informative class discussions held by Freirean learning groups, and the successes of the first stages of the Freirean word-building method. A kind of measure of these successes was the amount of attention these projects received from the state's Security Police over that time, with the Learn and Teach magazine being banned (and unbanned on appeal) several times, police raids on learning groups and the arrest and questioning of project staff and teachers at various times, while I was working at Learn and Teach.

But these early successes did not last long, and the process tended to become routinised. Learner lack of interest in the code-generated discussion became apparent and the Freirean word-building methods became increasingly teacher-led, chant-based and monotonous. The method of word-building, which required the activity of building a number of words from just a few syllables derived from one generative word, deferred the reading and writing of meaningful texts, and apathy and learner absence often set in before these were arrived at (Prinsloo, 1991a). This problem was worsened by the general lack of available and relevant materials in African languages. Freire's own writing provided very little guidance for addressing complex problems relating to a context where the dominant language of literacy use was not the learners' first language. As a result, literacy projects and teachers turned to the methods of teaching developed by applied linguists and language teachers, who had given more attention than Freire to the complexities of literacy and language acquisition.

The numbers of adults who attended Freirean learning groups never numbered more than several thousand people, in a population where millions of people had very little or no schooling. Nor could the Freirean projects produce details of follow-through which could show that the literacy learning had made a real difference to a significant number of individual's lives. Under these conditions the Freirean direction was vulnerable as an approach and a methodology in the lead-up to the dismantling of apartheid government.

2. The refiguring of the illiteracy problem: Adult basic education and Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET)

In the middle and later 1980s in South Africa, adult educators at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the Universities of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town started to engage actively with the question of adult illiteracy from the perspective of systematized educational provision. Their analyses and arguments contrasted strongly with those of the adult literacy non-governmental organizations described above.

They conceptualized adult literacy work as adult basic education, using a schooling model of provision, and called for greater systematizing and standardizing of adult literacy work (Human Sciences Research Council, 1982; see Prinsloo, 1991b, for a critical perspective on these arguments).

An intensified version of these same arguments developed in the 1990s, during the period of transition to political transformation. Those policy debates around literacy were first initiated by trade union officials and activists within the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). They shared concerns over the ineffectiveness of the adult literacy work currently underway, Freirean as well as other models of provision. Their solution was, similar to the earlier HSRC proposals, to frame adult literacy work within a systemic model of educational delivery. The COSATU proposals were influenced by their study of Australian and New Zealand models of educational restructuring of education systems that followed outcomes-based educational models. They proposed an integrated education and training system, and saw these proposals as one part of an 'active labour market policy', aimed at 'career pathing', 'multi-skilling' and the reduction of class and gender segmentation in the allocation of jobs and social rewards (COSATU, 1992; Kraak, 1991, 1992).⁵ The model emphasized a corporate and collaborative strategy between government, business and labour, enacted through participation in various stakeholder forums. Intensified education and training efforts were seen as crucial to the success of this strategy. Literacy was refigured as Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). ABET was regarded as the key basic skill upon which further skills development hinged, and from which Black members of the organized working class would undergo further skill training and further education, and move up the job ladder to better lives. Unemployed persons could acquire skills, qualification and jobs through ABET study. This ABET model developed the logic of the adult basic education model of the late 1980s put forward by the HSRC but drew on emerging, influential international discourses for the restructuring of education systems based on outcomes assessment models.

The impact of these policy discussions was a reconceptualization of illiteracy as a social problem. Whereas before 1990 it had been located as an issue within oppositional political discourse because of the state's repression of the rights of Black people, in the early 1990s

⁵ During apartheid the distinction between education and training had been overlaid with a social distinction: education for whites; training and poor education for blacks, to equip them as labourers. This helps to explain the intense insistence (still seen in the recurrent conflict at a governmental level between the Department of Labour and the Department of Education over integrating education and training).

illiteracy became an issue within a state sponsored discourse of social development, with significant implications for policy, provision and research.

Writing at the time, Mignonne Breier and I commented:

The political settlement that was initiated in 1990 altered the way the 'problem of illiteracy' was located in wider discourse without, as yet, affecting the scale of provision. The negotiated nature of the political settlement, and the incorporation of erstwhile foes into a 'government of national unity' led by the African National Congress, meant that the legacies of the past became the collective burden of all present in the new government. The 'problem of adult illiteracy' became a developmental issue, and also a site of activity for some of the larger institutional forces concerned to develop working strategies of 'redress', and of making up the 'social backlog' that was the legacy of apartheid. Adult literacy concerns were thus refigured, becoming a locus of attention in policy debates and rearticulated in new discourses of policy and development (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996, 13).

In 1991 a task team of the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), appointed by the National Education Coordinating Committee (NECC), with the support of the African National Congress, undertook the most substantial review of adult literacy work up to that time. It was one part of a multi-part review of education for policy-making purposes.⁶ The mandate given to researchers for the NEPI study on Adult Basic Education (which I co-convened with Judy Favish, a COSATU official, and Kathy Watters, a graduate student at the University of Cape Town) was to identify the statistical dimensions of the field which was referred to as that of Adult Basic Education; secondly, to summarise and review the strategies for redress that were being put forward by the major social and educational institutions with regard to the field of adult literacy provision; and, thirdly, to provide some evaluation of these strategies, without imposing our own commitments and interests. The perspectives and models for intervention of individual academics were specifically excluded from this process of review (NEPI, 1992).

Using available data from the Development Bank of South Africa and from the 1985 census, the NEPI report estimated that around 15 million people out of a total adult population of 23 million had less than five years of schooling. But these data, collected by one of the NEPI researchers, were problematic. Firstly, the assumed correspondence of certain levels of school

⁶ The National Education Coordinating Committee was set up as an interim policy agency in education to assist the incoming ANC prepare for educational transformation. The National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) was a policy research exercise to study options and proposals for restructuring across a number of educational sites, tasked to address concerns around 'equality and efficiency' in educational provision.

attainment with an abstract notion of literacy attainment was problematic. Secondly, the data were compiled by one agency, the Development Bank of South Africa, but drew on data that involved self-reporting by 14 different educational authorities, including from the “Homeland” governments.⁷ Many of these had been in ongoing crisis during the 1980s, with schools closed, and under attack, and with school inspectors and other Ministry officials sometimes too fearful even to visit particular schools. The reliability of such data was thus questionable for a number of related reasons. As the only available data, however, these figures were presented in the NEPI report (1992), with qualifications attached stating that they should not be used to constitute a reliable and clearly demarcated target population for adult literacy teaching efforts.

Yet this figure of 15 million illiterates continued to be quoted for several years in policy statements, despite the NEPI report’s explicit references to the problems with the data. For example, the influential report of the CEPD (Centre for Education Policy Development, 1994) gave prominence to the figure. The figure featured again in the ANC’s key policy statement which set up the processes that resulted in the new assessment-driven system:

It is estimated that about 15 million Black adults (over one third of the population) are illiterate... The lack of access to basic education, including literacy and numeracy, has consigned millions of our people to silence and marginalization from effective and meaningful participation in social and economic development (ANC Education Department, A Policy Framework for Education and Training, 1994:87).

The following slogan appeared on posters issued in 1995, by organizations involved with literacy provision in South Africa: “What do 15 million South Africans have in common? - They cannot read or write. SUPPORT LITERACY!”

As a co-author of the NEPI task team, I was perturbed by how simplistic and dichotomous a model of literacy and illiteracy was taken up by policy-makers and literacy advocates alike.⁸ In particular, the association of illiteracy with silence and marginalization presented in the

⁷ The ‘Homelands’ were the formerly called Bantustans, areas of South Africa designated as Black residential areas, and given limited political rights by the central, white government.

⁸ The tendency to use inflated and simplistic figures has endured into the new millennium, as French (2002) attests:

“Virtually everybody is now using the figures (derived from the 1996 General Population Census and the annual October Household Surveys) that of the slightly more than 26 million adults (people aged 15 and over) about 12 to 13 million of them have less than a full (grade 9) general education, about 7.5 to 8.5 million of these have less than grade 7 (often used as a minimum education level indicator of functional literacy) and about 3 to 4 million people have had no schooling at all. However, these figures tend to be used rather loosely so people will often talk about ‘12 million illiterates...’” French (2002, 37).

ANC document quoted above, recycled the Freirean idea that illiterates live in a 'culture of silence' which, despite having a revolutionary ring to it, was a problematic concept, because illiteracy was thereby constructed as a generalized social disability.

The NEPI report was ambiguous on whether literacy did indeed operate as an independent variable in the ways suggested in the ANC Policy Framework quoted earlier. There was some discursive tension in the document, as Malan (1998, 30) has noted. For example, the report referred to “a significant body of literature that links literacy with maternal and child health, infant mortality and fertility patterns” (NEPI 1992, 7), implying, if not exactly claiming, some kind of causal relationship. In summarizing what was claimed in much of the literature about people who cannot read and write, the Report summarized:

They are disadvantaged in job-seeking, they are sometimes unable to participate effectively in training or development programmes, they might be unable to provide support for their own children's learning and they might be unable to respond to the critical medical and environmental issues which pose direct threats to their existence (NEPI 1992, 1).

On the other hand, the report warned that literacy should not be regarded in decontextualized and universalized terms, as it was not a “free-ranging technology to be plugged in when it is needed” (NEPI 1992, 2):

(c)urrent thinking relates literacy use to its social context and suggests that it is not helpful to think in terms of a single literacy when multiple literacies may co-exist for the performance of widely varying personal, social and economic functions (NEPI, 1992, 3)

Such qualifications, cautionaries and nuances were more easily lost in that the Report's main function was to present the prevailing models for delivery of adult literacy work after the political transition to democratic government.⁹ All of the models that were examined worked

⁹ It is interesting to note a related ambivalence in a recent UNESCO Education Sector study (2004). Whereas earlier UNESCO policy studies and interventive practices have been firmly driven in the past by an autonomous model of literacy as a unitary concept and a basic skill, this study signals a new direction for UNESCO, which draws directly on New Literacy Studies research. The study, entitled ‘The Plurality of Literacy and its Implications for Policy and Programs’ argues:

The plurality of literacy refers to the many ways in which literacy is employed and the many things with which it is associated in a community or society and throughout the life of an individual. People acquire and apply literacy for different purposes in different situations, all of which are shaped by culture, history, language, religion and socio-economic conditions. The plural notion of literacy latches upon these different purposes and situations. Rather than seeing literacy as only a generic set of technical skills, it looks at the social dimensions of acquiring and applying literacy. It emphasizes that literacy is not uniform, but is instead culturally and linguistically and even temporally diverse. It is shaped by social as well as educational institutions: the family, community, workplace, religious establishments, and the state. Constraints on its acquisition and application lie not simply in the individual, but also in relations and patterns of communication structured by society. Numerous examples from the critical literature on the diverse social practices of literacy substantiate this view

with assumptions of literacy as a simple, basic and generalized skill. The most substantial and detailed of these models was the one put forward by COSATU, with ANC support, for a model of Adult Basic Education and Training. I summarise it briefly below.

3. The NEPI Report on models of adult literacy provision and further policy processes

The NEPI research found sustained, and organized commitment to the development of a state-led Adult Basic Education and Training system that foregrounded human resources development concerns. This policy intervention came forcefully from COSATU (the leading trades union umbrella body in South Africa), and particularly from officials and researchers associated with the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). Amongst them were Alec Irwin, who was Education Officer at NUMSA and went on to become a senior Cabinet Minister in the Mandela- and Mbeki-led ANC governments, and Adrienne Bird who went on to drive the development of the National Qualifications Framework and the national skills development programme as a Director General in the Ministry of Labour. They were concerned with putting in place processes for systemic educational provision which would provide viable routes for working class job and social mobility. Their reviews of the existing work of state and non-state literacy provision, including the Freirean projects described earlier, found that it was too piecemeal, unable to show significant numbers of people who had benefited from literacy training, and was not linked by way of accreditation systems with further educational, training, certification and job opportunities (National Training Board, 1994). The formulation of an ABET policy was thus part of a larger process which created new policy frameworks for all aspects of the revised education and training system in South Africa. They drew on similar models for educational restructuring emerging from New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom elsewhere but developed a more comprehensive and ambitious framework than any of the models that were studied (Kraak, 1992; Kraak and Young, 2001).

of literacy as essentially situational yet dynamic (UNESCO, 2004, 13). (Amongst the five references acknowledged here are Street, 1995, 2003; and Prinsloo and Breier, 1996.)

The study rejects UNESCO's earlier commitment to the understanding of literacy as "a set of technical skills: reading, writing and calculating", and to "literacy campaigns aimed at the 'eradication of illiteracy' in a few years" (UNESCO, 2004, 8) and puts forward a much more varied approach towards the development of "literate environments". The study however, continues to support the earlier objective set out in the International Plan of Action of the United Nations Literacy Decade, that of "improving literacy levels by 50%" by 2012 (UNESCO, 2004, 6). Such unlikely targets repeat earlier logic about literacy as a unitary notion, and one with 'levels' that can be reliably tested by standard and uniform scales.

The NEPI report was the first of a series of studies which contributed to the policy-formulation process. As the Education Ministry summarized on their web-site, the key statements in the first half of the 1990s were:

- the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) which took place under the auspices of the National Education Coordinating Committee
- the Congress of South African Trade Union's Participatory Research Project
- the National Training Strategy Initiative undertaken by the National Training Board
- the Conference held by the South African Committee for Adult Basic Education (SACABE) in November 1993
- the Implementation Plan for Education and Training developed by the Centre for Education Policy Development and the African National Congress prior to the country's first general election in 1994, and
- the ANC's Education and Training Policy (1994). (www.gov.za/education/abet/policy.htm)

These successive documents fed off each other sequentially, in a process of refinement and sophistication but they retained a construction of adult illiteracy as a singular and clearly defined social problem that included a clearly defined target population.

In September 1995 the work culminated in adoption by the Minister of Education of *A National Adult Basic Education and Training Framework: Interim Guidelines* as interim policy. The work thus produced the uniquely South African notion of ABET, which was created as a response to perceived inadequacies of adult literacy work, premised on a real linking up of educational and job training activities such that the divide between mental and manual labour would be transcended. ABET provision was intended to be one of the cornerstones of the elaborate devised National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which linked up the various levels of education in a system of interlocking specifications, outcomes and qualifications. This direction echoed, and was influenced by similar directions in setting up national outcomes-based frameworks for education in New Zealand, Australia, the UK and Canada,. (Kraak and Young, 2001, Kraak 1992; 1991).

The NQF emphasizes certification and learning outcomes (or competencies), in an interlocking grid of qualifications, spanning schooling, vocational training and the adult education system (specifically skills training, but also ABET). The framework includes a national system of accreditation, allowing portability of qualifications, vertically across three hierarchically structured bands; general education, further education and higher education, and horizontally across fields which comprise the education and training system in South Africa. A list of “unit standards” for each sector is generated by standards-setting bodies who

are lined to a central qualifications authority. The unit standards are intended to be content-free and context-free (or generic) descriptions of knowledge-skills, which can be tested. (Kraak and Young, 2001; Kell, 1996b; National Training Board, 1994)

With these larger national processes underway I became concerned to examine some of the assumptions about literacy that underlay the construction of ABET. The result was the development of the Social Uses of Literacy (SoUL) research project that undertook ethnographic research work. I present an overview in chapter three. It is noteworthy that this research produced a substantial body of data, findings and arguments which have appeared in a book, a series of reports and numerous conference and workshop presentations, as well as several academic theses. The products of the research have been well received in academic circles but they have had only a little influence on policy processes. I take up this point after I have developed an overview of what the research produced and how it did that.

Developing the focus for the SoUL project

Supported by colleagues in the University of Cape Town's Department of Adult Education and the University of the Western Cape's Centre for Adult and Continuing Education (CACE), I developed a proposal in 1993 and obtained funding for a research project on adult literacy called the Social Uses of Literacy (SoUL) project. We undertook a series of ethnographic studies to investigate the uses and valuations that people without schooling attached to literacy. The study was designed and planned as an intervention into the prevalent policy debates around adult literacy provision.

As I set it out in documents in the run-up to the project, the SoUL research project emerged from a concern that policy and provision in adult literacy work rested on a set of untested assumptions about the demand for and the outcomes of literacy training. These assumptions were:

1. Illiteracy constitutes a clearly marked social problem, with detrimental social and individual effects that are apparent and more or less universal.
2. Literacy, independent of its context of use, is associated with a range of virtues, including personal, societal and economic benefits.
3. Adult literacy programmes are a significant policy instrument for redressing past inadequate provision of formal schooling, by way of giving adults comparable skills to those they failed to get through schooling. These programmes can also be seen as part of a human resources and economic development strategy (Prinsloo, Millar and Morphet, 1993, 9).

It might be said that the exigencies of policy-formation in the new South Africa in the early 1990s demanded simple categorizations, such as clearly and statistically demarcated cohorts of people identified for the purposes of action. The trouble with this argument is that in the process of categorizing social problems and their solutions in simplistic terms, strategies for intervention based on such categories might prove ineffectual and wasteful. In my thinking, and that of colleagues who worked with me on developing the project, the work of constructing a system of Adult Basic Education rested on mistaken assumptions about the target population and mistaken assumptions as to what the educational intervention offered as a solution to those problems.

.As we summarized it then,

The simple fact is that illiterate people are not pressing their claims, either explicitly or implicitly, for training. None of the three sectors (the state, industry and the non-government organizations) reports the pressure of large numbers of people who cannot be accommodated in the existing facilities for provision (Morphet, Millar and Prinsloo, 1992, 6).

The attitude of COSATU and later ANC policy writers was that the current low take-up was a consequence of the low levels of organization, weak pedagogy and lack of systemic articulation in the existing system of adult literacy provision. Such commitments did not consider that the *perceptions* that local people held of literacy and of formal educational provision might also crucially affect the take-up and effectiveness of such literacy programmes.

In preparing for the research, I carried out a review of previous research that had studied adults without schooling and their experiences with literacy in South Africa (Prinsloo, 1995). I looked for research about adults both *learning* as well as *using* literacy. I found that studies from within the education and adult education fields reflected strong unquestioning commitments to the value of providing literacy skills for adults and little attention to the reception and effects of such provision. Indeed, the previous research focused almost exclusively on the dynamics of providing literacy to adults, and consequently focused on providers rather than the recipients. Recipients or 'learners' featured mostly in head-counts, collated in statistics to demonstrate the relative accomplishments of the competing providers. Where the 'learners' were described it was in uniform, identikit portraits, where the gaze of the providers presented their determining characteristic as that of cultural deficit.

Wilson's (1991) account of the night schools around Cape Town from 1945 to 1947 is a good example of this adult educators' gaze or perspective. The teachers and administrators are the

focus and heroes of Wilson's research. The people attending classes remain remarkably insubstantial. Hers is a story of a literacy volunteer movement that echoes similar efforts elsewhere in the world, of a small band of dedicated teachers working tirelessly in the face of the indifference of a larger society. It is a story of teachers rather than learners, of students from UCT who volunteered as teachers for the night schools. Many of them spoke enthusiastically of their memories of this activity¹⁰. In summing up the effects of the night schools, which had over 500 students in regular attendance at their peak, Wilson sketched the adult learners as follows:

Illiterate, poverty-stricken migrants, cut off from family life and confused in a new urban worker society found a warm, responsive environment in the night schools. Here they learnt to read and write their own language and write letters home, to speak, read and write the new language used in their daily working lives and to develop greater fluency in language skills. As they progressed, they learnt to comprehend an ever-widening range of written and spoken thought, to read newspapers and to take part in a range of community activities that could also extend to church, trade unions and politics. Sometimes, if lucky, through their new learning, they earned slightly better wages and found slightly better jobs (Wilson, 1991, 33).

Encapsulated here is the standard cultural stereotype of the adult literacy learner that has characterized much of South Africa's subsequent adult literacy work. The picture is that of persons described in terms of their deficits, of social dependents slowly emerging from their helplessness because of the rich cultural resources that come their way through the night school. It is a story of slow progress and evolution on the part of people who are not seen as already culturally located. But the processes of cultural assimilation, hybridization and relocation must surely have been more complex than that. These people did not enter the night schools as blank ciphers or empty vessels.

The Mayibuye Night Schools

Another example from a very thin literature is Bird's (1984) account of the African College, started by a group of University of the Witwatersrand students in the late 1940s. The African College later mutated into the Mayibuye Night Schools. The night schools were started on a wave of anti-fascism produced by ex-South African soldiers' connection with the Allied war

¹⁰ Amongst those Cape night school volunteer teachers from UCT who were to later play larger parts on the South African stage were Richard Turner, an academic and left-wing political activist who was assassinated; Neville Alexander 'Non-European Unity Movement' activist, Robben Island detainee and later UCT academic concerned with defending African languages from English hegemony; BenTurok, Communist Party leader and

effort. The schools were modelled on conventional schooling, teaching literacy in a manner closer to school teaching, and received the support, first of the Transvaal Teachers Association, then municipal subsidy and were on the brink of further state subsidy when the National Party came to power and took total control of all Black education.

The night school movement all but disappeared soon thereafter. In 1955, at its peak, the movement had centres in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth and East London, with a claimed 10 000 people attending night school. By 1962 it was reported that there were only 2 218 students left in night schools and continuation classes. In Bird's account what interests her is the clash of ideological differences between socialist and liberal educators. Again, the dynamics of literacy learning, use and application of the adult learners is of secondary interest in Bird's account, and lacks contour, substance and detail.

I therefore had to look beyond these adult educational studies for more fine-grained examples of representations of unschooled South Africans in the research literature. I found two exemplars in the ethnographic approaches to historical and cultural studies of Harries (1994) and Hofmeyr (1993) where attention to issues around literacy is only incidental to their concerns, but nonetheless far more revealing than the above studies of adult literacy provision.

Cultural historical ethnographic perspectives on situated literacies

The historian Patrick Harries's (1994) study of Mozambican migrant workers in Johannesburg and Kimberley around the turn of the 20th century provided help and stimulus. Harries' detailed historical account of immigrants to the mines in Kimberley and the Witwatersrand around the turn of the 19th century demonstrated that the identities that Black miners created for themselves was not simply that of a victimized, fractured, racially defined working class. He argued, on the basis of closely and finely observed descriptions, that Black immigrants established their own norms and expectations in a cultural world that was neither that which they had grown up in, nor was it that of their employers. Their attitudes to work, leisure, clothes, alcohol, religion and learning, among others, marked their dynamic construction of their own world, albeit within the constraints of colonial society. It was this sense of active appropriation and contestation under conditions of cultural and political

later an African National Congress member of parliament; and Raymond Ackermann, head of the Pick n' Pay supermarket chain.

pressure and change that I thought the SoUL researchers might try to bring to the study of literacy in social practice in the present. Harries's study included some attention to the reception and uses of literacy. He argued that missionaries working on the Kimberley diamond fields and on the Witwatersrand gold mines had considerably more success with both Christian conversions and with literacy teaching than those working in rural areas. First Kimberley, after diamond mining began, and then Johannesburg, where gold was mined, came to be regarded as the most important mission centres in the country. Black migrant workers from all over Southern Africa converged on these industrial sites. Separated from the tight controls of their home communities, Harries suggested, they were more susceptible to conversion.

Harries suggested that in the new urban industrial settings literacy and Christianity had greater purpose for the mine workers than it might have for them in the rural areas from which they travelled:

Literacy allowed the worker to fit more easily into the expanded and complex society on the Witwatersrand, and it provided him with a new sense of power. The ability to read enabled him to comprehend the printed words that made up his work ticket, the various passes controlling his movements, and the sign-posted instructions that regulated his life. Letter-writing enabled the migrant to respond swiftly to appeals for help from home, and it provided a conduit for the information and knowledge that brought home and work into a single geographic space....An ability to read in the vernacular, and particularly in English, gave the miner access to worlds that were both spiritual and secular, while a familiarity with the symbols and codes of whites allowed him a certain upward mobility. The literate worker could become a dormitory scribe, writing dictated letters for one shilling or move into domestic service, clerical posts, or other forms of service beyond the mine (Harries, 1994, 215).

Harries certainly found more detail in his account of miners' lives at the turn of the century than Wilson, discussed above, found in her account of the people who attended the Cape night schools in the 1950s. However, in this earlier work Harries wrote of "the miner", "the migrant" and "the literate worker" in relation to literacy, using these generic categories, as if there was a common and not a differentiated response to literacy and Christianity on the part of individuals amongst the miners. More importantly for my concerns, he also worked with a more generic and theoretically underdeveloped notion of how specific miners took on specific literacies in specific ways. His later study (Harries, 2001) of missionaries, literacy and local people at the Swiss mission station which I describe in some detail in chapter five of this thesis had not yet been written. The later study takes greater and explicit account of the New

Literacy Studies arguments about situationally varied orientations to literacy. It shows far greater concern to understand the complex forms and functions literacy takes when it is engaged with by people who are themselves already culturally located. However, Harries's concern in his earlier work with the substance of the lives of miners, and with regarding them as 'cultural agents' rather than 'cultural dupes' was exemplary and enlightening. So was the detail and depth of his portrayal of their lives. His analysis of the miners' identity construction practices anticipates later work in the New Literacy Studies that draws on Babha's (1995) concept of the 'third space'. For example, Wilson (2001) in Lancaster England described how prisoners drew on letter writing to construct identities for themselves that were neither the stereotypes constructed in the outside world, nor the restricted identities offered them by the prison institution.

Harries's account of how Christianity and literacy were taken up in particular located ways by migrant workers in the mining towns, and then relocated and interpreted in the very different rural contexts of the migrants' homes, was of relevance to my concerns. He reported that small literacy groups proliferated in the worker compounds and nearby mission halls of the Kimberley diamond fields and on the Witwatersrand gold mines. Most worked under the guidance of church elders, but many were run by migrant workers. The mining houses often aided the missionaries in their efforts, providing venues for classes and purchasing books. While the books and teaching "were often in the vernacular, the content reflected little else from the migrant miners' own world" (Harries, 1994, 216). Harries wrote that many migrant workers returned home "with an element of literacy and a familiarity with European concepts of ethnicity, race and religion". They then carried home with them the influence of the missionaries' religious teachings, however limited, and "laid the seeds of belief in rural areas" where missionaries had long struggled to inculcate Christianity (Harries, 1994, 63). Some returning migrants, filled with proselytizing zeal, formed night schools for adults, and day schools for children. Literacy was not to take hold back home, however, to the extent that Christianity did, he says, in rural areas cut off from the daily social practices of the colonizers (Harries, 1994, 63).

Literacy take-up and the politics of domination

Complementary to Harries' perspective was Hofmeyr (1993). She studied the Valtyn chiefdoms' struggle over land in the 'Northern Transvaal' with colonial authority, and the subsequent stories that were told about it. She includes considerable attention to literacy, noting, from her reading of Street (1984), that "literacy does not have the uniformity or

monolithic quality that is sometimes associated with it. On the most simple level, reading and writing do not automatically go together, and each can be disaggregated into a range of subsidiary skills and activities” (Hofmeyr, 1993, 49). She developed an understanding of how the Valtyn Ndebele communities encountered the initial agents of literacy and education in the form of violent confrontations with Boers, intent on establishing a Boer Republic, followed closely by the arrival of the Berlin missionary society, which conducted its business in Sotho, a language disparaged by the Ndebele chiefs as that of commoners. She found that the Ndebele chiefs' first exposure to writing associated it with Boer violence. As a consequence, and because missionary education was undertaken in the language of the lowly, they resisted the notion of literacy (Hofmeyr, 1993, 42). With the entrenchment of colonial administration and the advent of formal education at the turn of the century, this resistance to literacy kept many people away from schools and the skills for social advancement which they offered. As 'late starters' in the industrializing world, many Ndebele found themselves marginalized and marooned in paradoxical comparison to the position of relative strength they had displayed in resisting the literacy they were offered in the first place.

Harries and Hofmeyr's studies both importantly drew attention to the critical influence of the political and economic circumstances under which people first encounter literacy and to how these circumstances impact directly on how they 'take hold' of literacy. What people make of reading and writing, how they make reading and writing part of, or isolate them from their existing repertoire of practices and communicative strategies, depends on the circumstances under which they encounter reading and writing. Such findings coincided with arguments then emerging from ethnographic studies internationally that were associated with the New Literacy Studies (Reder, and Wikelund, 1993; Besnier, 1993; Kulick and Stroud, 1993). The challenge for literacy research that follows from these insights is that, as a researcher, one has to get as close to an understanding of insider knowledge as one can, to get an understanding of what is going on, and to represent that in as much detail and complexity as one can manage. It was this perspective that informed the opening orientation that I brought to the research task at the start of the SoUL project, which I discuss in chapter three.

I have dealt here in some detail with the dynamics leading up to the launching of the first sustained application in South Africa of a social practices approach to literacy. I have traced a tendency in policy and educational processes towards a narrowing and restricting notion of literacy, whereas the research impetus was towards an opening out and expanding of that notion. I will show a related dynamic across the studies I look at in this thesis, with policy proposals and educational strategies seeking to define a simple model of literacy as a basic

skill in a hierarchy of skills, and a research dynamic from the perspective of the social practices approach to literacy that complicates and destabilizes that simple notion. I argue that this difference is not simply an outcome of the fields of policy and research placing different emphases on the same problem. My argument is that the construction of literacy as a single, unified and generally applicable concept produces particular problems for research as well as for educational delivery. I argue that policy and educational interventions based on an assumption that literacy is a uniform, decontextualized and directly transmittable basic skill produces bad education and social intervention strategies. I show this firstly through the findings of the SoUL project. While the SoUL project outlined in detail that the population of adult illiterates constructed by policy research was a fiction, it also, in hindsight, produces evidence that a social practices approach to literacy in South Africa has to be developed beyond that presented in the SoUL reports. That is the work I undertake in the chapters that follow.

First application of a social practices approach to the study of literacy in South Africa

Chapter Three: The Social Uses of Literacy research project: methods, findings and directions

The SoUL setting: Researchers, advisors, research orientation

In setting out the detailed research frame and in preparing to do the research, the SoUL researchers¹ were assisted during 1993 and 1994 by proponents of the New Literacy Studies whom we approached for input, and by anthropologists from the University of Cape Town (UCT) and University of the Western Cape (UWC), and elsewhere. Brian Street in particular, participated in extended training and planning seminars for researchers, both at the beginning and during the research. As series editor for the publishers, he assisted in editing the book that reported on the SoUL research, and he wrote an extended preface to the book that engaged freshly with epistemological issues to do with the ethnographic study of literacy, defending it against accusations of relativism, romanticism and lack of relevance (Street, 1996). Shirley Brice Heath whose *Ways with Words* (1984) was closely read by the SoUL researchers spent a week with the SoUL team early on in the project history, and later wrote positively about the published SoUL research (Heath, 1999). Alan Feldman and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, visiting anthropologists from the USA, and Andrew ‘Mugsy’ Spiegel, David Bunn and other anthropologists from UCT and UWC gave seminars as part of research planning and preparation. Besides the three-week initial training seminar, researcher meetings were held on

¹The SoUL research work at UWC was coordinated by Mignonne Breier who was a recent graduate in Adult Education at UCT. I had supervised her field study of local attitudes to and uses of literacy in the working-class township of Ocean View, on the Cape Peninsula. The UWC team included Diane Gibson, who was a trained anthropologist working in the Anthropology Department; Kathy Watters, an experienced adult literacy organiser and a recent graduate student whose thesis I had supervised on the challenges facing a proposed adult literacy programme in the building industry in the Western Cape; Matsepela Taetsane and Lynnette Sait who were graduate students at UWC. The UCT SoUL team included myself as coordinator, Liezl Malan who moved from Fort Hare University where she was studying literacy in Newtown. She completed the Newtown study for the SoUL project and carried out a further case study in Newtown, as part of her SoUL work. She also wrote up this work for submission for a PhD which she received from the Departments of Afrikaans and Anthropology at UCT; Steven Robins was a trained anthropologist having completed his PhD study of rural village politics in relation to development strategies in Zimbabwe; Phumza Mpoyiya was a graduate student in Education at UCT; Mary-Jane McEwan was a graduate language teacher from Rhodes University with good Xhosa second-language skills, and linguistic and educational training; and Ammon China was a graduate in Economic History at UCT, a fluent speaker of Xhosa, English and Afrikaans, and a Rastafarian and musician. This proved to be an eclectic but productive mix of persons with varying experiences in literacy, education, research and anthropology. The most advanced specialist theoretical resources were undoubtedly those of anthropology and anthropologically informed ethnographic studies, as contributed by Steven Robins and Diana Gibson. The other researchers, including the two research coordinators, had less theoretical research training and were generalists, educationists or new academics, as far as their training and background was concerned.

a monthly basis throughout the research process, and research workshops were held periodically.

The research strategy that was developed rested on a principle of turning the focus of attention and inquiry away from the discourses and practices of planners and providers and towards the so-called illiterate persons who were the objects of these plans and programmes. The founding question for the SoUL research program thus became an inversion of the familiar policy question - from: *What can we (planners and providers) do about illiteracy?* to: *What are they (unschooled adults) doing in relation to print literacy?* This inverted question posed the 'failure' of adult literacy programmes as something other than questions of how to organise delivery, curriculum and pedagogy for maximum effectiveness. Instead, as Morphet (1996: 258) put it, in an afterword to the published research

[The SoUL research] opened a conceptual space by shutting off, at least temporarily, the twin 'literacy' discourses of social failure and curative action, the ways of thinking about the issues of literacy were transformed from a technical to an anthropological framework.

In following this objective the SoUL research set out, through detailed qualitative research in a range of contexts, to shed light on the encompassing question: *What patterns of incentives/disincentives govern the acquisition, provision and use of literacy?*

In planning the research, the research team read and discussed the body of work that were considered key texts then comprising the New Literacy Studies, in particular those of Scribner and Cole (1981), Heath (1983) and Street (1984). Gee's (1991) conceptually detailed review and support for a social practices approach to the study of literacy, was another very influential resource that Mignonne Breier and I drew on in our summary of the conceptual resources that shaped the SoUL work, in our published introduction to the case studies (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996, 11-29).

In this chapter I examine how the SoUL work attempted to draw on and elaborate on those earlier foundational texts, and how it set the basis for further studies that involve epistemological and methodological development of the approach to literacy. In my account here of the SoUL work, I am concerned with identifying how it endorsed and contributed to the larger body of ethnographies of literacies that consider literacy as situated social practice, as well as how it helped set the basis for further work, in what Baynham (2004) has called the 'third generation' of ethnographies of literacy.

Disciplinary and methodological influences on the SoUL work

The influences of the three studies that I presented in chapter one can be summarized as those of a critical British anthropological tradition, represented in Street's (1984) work, a Hymesian socio-linguistic tradition represented in Heath's (1983) work, and an emerging Vygotskian socio-cultural cognitive studies tradition represented in the work of Scribner and Cole (1981). In researcher training discussions, with Street, Heath and others, we examined debates around the concept of *multiple literacies*, a key concept in this body of work (Gee, 1990; Barton and Ivanic, 1991). On the one hand, the idea that there are different and multiple literacies, each connected to specific forms of language, specific activities, and specific identities, was an exciting idea. It showed potential for interpreting the way specific attitudes to and uses of literacy emerge in local contexts. On the other hand, the characterization of literacy as multiple, as Street pointed out then, can easily slip into a descriptive social relativism which says that groups of people (or "cultures") each have their own particular ways of reading and writing, and that these are fundamentally as appropriate to their settings as other literacies are to their respective settings. Such an approach would not examine the effects of power, both locally and between the local and wider social institutional contexts, that shaped local practices. That is, such an analysis could not take account of the contested, conflictual and unequal social relations that produce attitudes to 'standard' and hegemonic ways of using and valuing literacy. The need for attention to contests around literacies had first been signaled by Street labelling his approach an 'ideological model', rather than a 'multiple literacies' model (see Street 1984, 1993). Liezl Malan, who worked as a SoUL researcher referred to her first encounters with the discussions around epistemology and method that were part of such research orientation work as something of an ideological encounter of its own:

When I joined the Social uses of Literacy (SoUL) project team in Cape Town, our project leader, Mastin Prinsloo, insisted that I move beyond a mere description of different kinds of literacies to an interpretation of the ideological meanings of literacy for the people in my sites of study (Malan, 1998, 53).

Such discussions amongst the SoUL researchers signaled a New Literacy Studies concern that literacy researchers should examine the ways that literacy and language use were interwoven with aspects of social organization. The research team was urged to examine the ways that literacy practices varied at their research sites. They were also urged to examine and consider the ways that these differences were shaped by power dynamics and unequal social relationships between groups of people.

The SoUL research followed the methodological model of earlier work in the New Literacy Studies, that of an ethnographic, or ethnographic-styled approach (Heath, 1983, Street, 1984,

Barton and Ivanic, 1991, Besnier, 1993, Kulick and Stroud 1993, Rockhill 1993) and developed a series of case-studies linked by a common theoretical frame and methodology, drawn from the New Literacy Studies. Such a methodological orientation reflects an epistemic orientation to a social constructionist understanding of language and literacy. A social constructionist orientation sees literacy and language as situated social action of a particular sort, often distributed amongst co-participants. From this perspective, literacy is often a collective social practice, sometimes solitary, but always social.

The research presented in the SoUL book (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996) and in an accompanying series of separately published reports (see Appendix) set out to address the challenge of applying a social practices perspective to the study of literacy in South Africa. It also aimed to enhance and extend the conceptual language of the approach as it applies to particular empirical contexts. The data collected consisted of field-notes of extended periods of observation and participation in twelve separate sites; transcriptions, translations and interpretations of recorded interviews and conversations, photographs, copies of people's writings and drawings, and multiple versions of written interpretations of the data.

The orientation to ethnography was described as follows:

The SoUL research is primarily ethnographic in nature, in the sense that it involves close and concentrated observation over periods of time, and is rooted in reflexive theoretical principles (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996, 24)

The studies in the New Literacy Studies that we drew on were not ethnographies in the old traditional anthropological sense of broad attempts to understand a particular society. Rather, they specifically investigated the meaning and role of literacy, amongst particular sub-groups or in particular social contexts. They did however draw specifically on anthropologists' research models:

the researchers were all concerned with engaging in depth with the 'life-worlds' of people, attempting to understand and develop accounts of the "complex webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973, 5) and develop the 'thick descriptions' which are the hallmarks of ethnographic research (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996, 24-25).

Misgivings are sometimes expressed about the use of such case material as is developed in the SoUL research for analytical as against illustrative purposes. What the research produces is not 'average' accounts, which stress the generalizable features of each case's context of study, but rather its distinctiveness and particularity. Such detail and specificity was sought, however, precisely because it could play an important role in critiquing over-simplistic

approaches to literacy and its social effects. For example, as discussed in detail earlier, the use of literacy/illiteracy statistics come to be taken as adequate accounts, whereas this is clearly not the case. The extent to which the constructs are a product of a particular theoretical orientation gets concealed or ignored. As Mitchell (1984, 239) pointed out, the particular kinds of inference that are drawn from quantitative data are inappropriate to case study research:

What the anthropologist using a case study to support an argument does is to show how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances. A good case study, therefore, enables the analyst to establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena which previously were ineluctable. From this point of view, the search for a “typical” case for analytical exposition is likely to be less fruitful than the search for a “telling” case in which the particular circumstances surrounding a case, serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent.

The SoUL project delivered a range of studies. They included case studies of literacy practices amongst various people attending voter education classes and voting in the 1994 parliamentary national elections (Prinsloo and Robins, 1996); labourers on three wine farms in the Western Cape (Gibson, 1996); workers in an asbestos factory (Breier and Sait, 1996), and at a school in Cape Town (Watters, 1996); residents of an Eastern Cape rural township called Newtown (Malan, 1996a; communal goat farmers in the Namaqualand semi-desert (Robins, 1996); residents of Bellville South in Cape Town (Malan, 1996b); gangsters and activists living in Marconi Beam squatter camp outside Cape Town (China and Robins, 1996); older residents of Khayelitsha (Mpoyiya and Prinsloo, 1996); residents of Tentergate and Zola in the rural Eastern Cape (McEwan and Malan, 1996); taxi-drivers in Cape Town (Breier, Taetsane and Sait, 1996); and residents of Site 5 squatter camp outside Cape Town on the southern peninsula (Kell, 1996). We picked out these sites for research because they were seen to be examples of social environments from which people were most likely to be recruited onto adult literacy programmes, because levels of education were low, and because levels of poverty were high. In addition, these sites were accessible to the researchers who would do the fieldwork. The challenge for the research coordinators, in the light of the Mitchell quote above, was to distil, from these distinct studies, what was 'telling' about them, and what could be told about them as a collection. I attempt to do those two things below.

Overview and review of the SoUL findings

For the purposes of this thesis I first outline selective details from two distinct sites, to show how such focused study throws up complicated configurations of literacy in local social

practices. Then I examine the arguments about literacy that emerge across the various studies. Finally, I set out a hindsight perspective on the SoUL research, drawing on and extending the conceptual resources developed so far in this thesis. My purpose is to establish what was accomplished in this first sustained application of a New Literacy Studies approach to important questions around literacy in South Africa, what the limits of this research are, from a later perspective, and how I will address these in subsequent chapters.

The various chapters of the SoUL book provide critical perspectives on the 'great divide' view of literacy that is a taken-as-given in South African policy documents and debates. 'Great divide' rhetoric, as I have discussed in my chapter one review of Street's (1984) work, assumes that 'being literate' brings uniform positive effects to those who have 'crossed over', while those 'left behind' are unable to participate meaningfully in personal, political, economic and cultural processes. The SoUL studies demonstrated the complex and sometimes unexpected ways in which literacy was taken up, circumvented, manipulated, valued and devalued in various social contexts.

The rhetorical divide collapses in the face of complex images of "illiterate" people who can perform difficult tasks requiring abstraction, transferral, spatial cognition and "literate" people, often women, who perform menial tasks requiring none of these competencies and little or no engagement with the written word (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996, 31).

I now discuss representative instances of research from the SoUL project that made this case, below.

Too illiterate to vote for freedom?

My own study with Steven Robins (Prinsloo and Robins, 1996) which opens the book, looked at the concern shown by some 1994 election organizers about the 'illiteracy' of South Africa's masses, particularly those living 'in rural areas'. The analysis starts by focusing on a report produced at Rhodes University that was distributed to the electoral and voter-education agencies several months before voter-education started (Pinnock and Polacsek, 1992, referred to below as the Report). The authors of the Report, subtitled 'Communicating Electoral Processes to a Low Literacy Audience', expressed deep concern about illiteracy as a distinguishing characteristic of much of the voter population. Drawing on claims of around 15 million "illiterate adults", it described this as 'frightening' and 'extremely worrying' as far as voter education planning was concerned (Pinnock and Polacsek, 1992, 1-2, quoted in Prinsloo and Robins, 1996, 35). The Report claimed that, because of widespread illiteracy, newspapers

were more “a source of fuel” (p2) rather than of information in rural areas as well as in urban 'squatter camps'. The Report also claimed that there were major problems associated with the use of television as well as 'easy' instructional comics for voter education purposes.

..people who can't read have trouble understanding pictures... *Our* visual syntax is premised on literacy and we compose our pictures accordingly (emphasis not in the original). Self-evident as television pictures may seem to the literate, they are surprisingly confusing for people who do not read... Television is essentially an urban medium and is programmed by literate people for literate people (Pinnock and Polacsek, 1992, 2, quoted in Prinsloo and Robins, 1996, 35).

The Report was thus concerned that millions of people, because of their illiteracy, would not take part in the elections. Their non-participation or failure to successfully participate would consequently seriously undermine the credibility and viability of the election processes, as to their accuracy as a measure of democratic will. The Report argued that only a massive literacy campaign could save the situation, and anticipated a disastrous outcome in its absence: “The catch is that this is unlikely to happen this side of majority rule if voting is so skewed by misinformation and ignorance that no strong government can emerge.” (Pinnock and Polacsek, 1992, 3, quoted in Prinsloo and Robins, 1996, 36) That such a perspective on literacy / illiteracy was itself not an invention of the writers of the Report but drew off a widely circulating narrative about illiteracy and citizenship is illustrated in this quote from the *New York Times* in the 1990s, where a representative of the mayor's office in Philadelphia complained: “Is it any wonder, with one of five adults unable to fully read a newspaper, that voter turnout has steadily fallen to record lows?” (quoted in Rockhill 1993: 157).

From a perspective that informed the emerging work of New Literacy Studies scholars Graff (1987) had already developed a critical perspective on the attitude to literacy that is represented in the Report as well as in the New York Times article. In these texts, Graff (1987, 134) pointed out, “literacy roles are typically linear, direct, progressive, relatively unmediated, highly pervasive, and requisite and responsible for individual, societal and national advancement”. Graff ascribed such views on literacy to a general assurance of the nature of literacy's contribution as derived from a post-Enlightenment synthesis of 'normative' humanistic and social scientific 'wisdom'. Such a view, he argued, had long precluded the direct study of literacy as a historical factor. Theoretical, historiographic and epistemological problems plagued the study of literacy, he suggested, because of its intimate association with progress and modernization.

My field research with Steven Robins and our research assistants, over several months leading up to the election, found that the assumptions in the Report as to how unschooled people would behave in relation to the election process were completely mistaken. Instead, differently located persons participated in, discussed, expressed anxieties and learned the technicalities of ballot completion in ways that did not distinguish them, in the first instance, as being either literate or illiterate (Prinsloo and Robins, 1996). We observed that the unavoidable pressures of the impending elections prevented any plans for quick literacy campaigns, which would not have delivered the expected returns anyway. Election planners and voter education organizations were forced into more pragmatic and realistic recognition of what unschooled people can do when it comes to decoding messages. As one trainer put it, “They (‘people that’s illiterate’) can’t read but they are actually very good at decoding symbols. They know where’s Shoprite (a down-market supermarket with a distinctive logo) because they know what Shoprite looks like.” (Prinsloo and Robins, 1996, 37)

The national parliamentary ballot, long as it was, included multiple signs indicating respective parties to vote for. These signs included the name of the party, its emblem, its name in acronyms (ANC, PAC, NP, CP, as well as a number of smaller parties such as KISS and SOCCER), also a photo of the party leader, and a blank square for recording a vote. There were thus four distinct signs for each party, only two of which were alphabetic writing. Clearly, on the occasion of South Africa’s first democratic national parliamentary elections at least the officials were anxious to prevent literacy from operating as an exclusionary or gate-keeping device.

Everyone the researchers spoke to reported watching television over that period. They included people from Cape Town’s suburbs, squatter camps and townships. They also included farmers and farm-labourers in the Western and Northern Cape, and they included fishermen and townspeople along the West Coast up to Lamberts Bay. The claims made in the Report about an inability of unschooled people to make sense of television messages proved completely wrong. We were reminded of Scribner and Cole’s (1981) findings that cognitive skills were not consistently distributed across their research population in terms of whether people were literate or not. Cognition was situated and skills were practices-based (Scribner and Cole, 1981), not generic and context-independent, as the ‘great divide’ scholars of literacy had claimed. On this point we wrote,

The latest events and appearances on the news programme ‘Agenda’ were on the minds of many people we spoke to, under remarkably diverse conditions. These included working-class suburbs, urban squatter camps, remote villages (where only a few TV

sets were present but shared, running on car batteries where there was no electricity) and farm owners' living-rooms into which were crowded both the farmer and his family as well as his labourers. The messages were received into busy and collective rooms, the farm owner and his labourers, for instance, drawing on different social dispositions and narratives at the moment of interpretation (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996, 36).

There was certainly no evidence of people not making sense of the images and narratives presented, though there was evidence of difference and debate as to what meaning was to be taken. Often the images and narratives were interpreted by people who held strongly religious frames of reference. For example, a narrative about Nelson Mandela as 'Moses', leading his people out of bondage, surfaced frequently. Some people had stories of Armageddon and the imminent end of the world to tell. Others had detailed and complex political narratives of the struggle against colonial and apartheid rule to draw on, which they had acquired through discussion, debate and through active political participation, not through reading, solitary or otherwise. People did not have to be actively reading and writing to be able to apply frameworks for critical interpretation of new information. They were not silenced or marginalized in those respects. Nor was there a simple division between modern and pre-modern understandings, or between rational and superstitious accounts.

The studies the researchers made of voter education workshops around Cape Town and along the West Coast to Lambert's Bay found the trainers adapting multiple orientations to their audiences. Literacy did not feature as an issue in their presentations. The voter education programmes observed included those where the trainers presented themselves as neutral as regards who people should vote for, and also voter education programmes which were more openly partisan. Both kinds of programmes included mock voting sessions, where people were issued with practice-ballots, went through screening procedures and filled in their ballot-forms. In the latter programmes, people were shown how to find the right place to put their crosses in the long list of 19 candidate parties, and across two ballots, one national and one regional. In one pro-ANC session we observed, potential voters were reminded to look for 'the wheel and the spear' (the ANC logo) when they voted. Politically conservative or right-wing white farmers described the voter education workshops they ran with the local National Party branch for their farm labourers. Labourers were told they should not stray in the upper part of the ballot form where they could get lost, but should "go straight for the bottom", where the NP was the last entry. 'Go for the bottom' was an informal NP slogan intended to simplify the procedure of party identification for the uneducated. As a strategy it was nullified by the late

inclusion of Inkatha Freedom Party, by way of a sticker added to the bottom, after the ballots had already been printed. But nobody complained afterwards that the results had consequently been skewed or distorted (Prinsloo and Robins, 1996, 46-7).

An SABC survey on voter education found that voter education, in one form or another, had reached 97% of people. Over 75% of the adult population voted and only one per cent of the ballots cast were spoilt votes (Prinsloo and Robins, 1996, 37), and the number of these which were intentionally spoilt was, of course, unknown. It was therefore conclusive that election organizers' early anxieties that large numbers of uneducated people would be out of reach were unfounded. As researchers we noted that Pinnock and Polacsek's (1992) pre-election Report drew on a discourse about illiteracy and its social consequences to construct a mass of people as a problematic 'other' whose characteristic feature ('illiteracy') defined their outsider status, as well as presenting a basis for action on them. Our research found, however, that such a population did not exist except as a discursive construct for scrutiny and social ordering (Foucault, 1975; 1972). We thus claimed that we had succeeded in "taking a more complex 'social' view of literacy, rather than simplistically designating large sectors of the population as illiterate" which enabled us "to understand better how these people dealt with the demands of modern balloting, and why the outcome was less dire than many reporters had predicted" (Prinsloo and Robins, 1996, 47).

The SoUL study of people from many walks of life encountering voting and voter education was partnered by a number of other studies, which were more site-based and localized. I examine one in some detail below, as an example of how local practices give particular shape to the uses and values attached to literacy. Such local realities again show up the inadequacies of universal and context-free assumptions about the social effects of literacy and illiteracy.

Literacy, knowledge, gender and power

Gibson's (1996) study of farm literacies is a particularly good example of a contained and focused study of literacy in a specific context. It sets out to examine limited themes that relate to the debates in the New Literacy Studies at that time. It develops "thick description" accounts of local social dynamics and shows how the particularities it finds impact on the wider debate around literacy, social competency, skill and power.

Gibson found that literacy practices among workers on three farms in the Western Cape were embedded in relationships of power between worker and farmer and between men and women. "Farm" knowledge was often privileged by both farmer and workers, was inherently "male" and accessible only to male workers. In contrast, "book" or "school" knowledge

amongst farm labourers was largely associated with women's activities outside of farm work. Female farm workers generally had more school education than male workers but did menial work on the farm and almost never used literacy in the course of their work. Being “literate” was not an important criterion for access to employment, power or training, though being male was. Tying together these complex and uneven divisions of labour and relations of power, access and influence was the idea of 'family', a patriarchal and paternalist discourse that gave clear roles to everybody from the farm-owner to the labourers' children. Women were excluded and marginalized through 'common sense' constructions of 'farm knowledge', of women not possessing such 'real' knowledge and not being 'real' breadwinners, despite on average having had more schooling than the men. Women's literacy was thus not farm-work linked. It was most visible through church practices, where women often took the lead.

Women's literacy practices encompassed a wide range of activities outside the farm workplace such as assistance to unschooled people and children coping with their homework, control of household finances and transactions, or reading in the public domain of religion.

The idea of 'farm as family' constructed farmers and labourers as a community of interest, and was sustained and manipulated, unequally, by both farmer and labourers, albeit in their own respective interests. “The workers were co-opted into making a sustained commitment in labour and to refrain from social behaviour which might jeopardize the economic growth of the farm” (Gibson 1996, 10). On their side, workers expected “housing which was in relatively good condition, free water and electricity, good treatment, financial aid, transport and assistance in medical and other emergencies, and to be cared for in old age” (Gibson 1996, 9). They also expected farmers to be responsible for maintaining the viability of the enterprise on which they depended. They did not make sustained demands for educational access for themselves, for literacy training or 'second-chance' schooling, but did demand schooling for their children, at least as much as they were able to press such demands.

Farmers needed workers with special skills: craftsmen, builders, welders, plumbers, and mechanics. They did not require literacy added to those skills, all of them learned informally as the workers were not recognized artisans; workers stressed their own strengths and the highly valued skills they had to offer, despite having no 'book learning' (Gibson 1996, 52). Gibson (1996) thus argued that in the farms investigated, being 'literate' was not the primary criterion for access to employment, power or training.

Gibson's (1996) study provided multiple examples of how unschooled male labourers had developed the capacities, skills or repertoire to accomplish particular literacy-linked activities

in their lives. Such situated literacies were part of the broader practice of 'farm knowledge' or know-how, and so were not identified as literacy by workers themselves. They understood literacy to be those practices of reading and writing which were more school-like than the situated and embedded practices of their own work activities.

For example, an experienced farm-worker showed Gibson how he used a complicated labeled diagram to lay, monitor and repair an irrigation system. The reading that was part of this task was embedded in the activity, and did not call on a school-acquired skill called literacy. It was thus not identified as reading. The same farm-worker described himself as illiterate but did not regard that as a burden

I cannot really read or write, but I am actually like a person who can read or write. I know my work. I *think* something and when I have thought it I will not forget it again. I keep it in my head, everything I know, I, how do you say it, I file it. Yes, I file it in my head and then read it again... (Gibson, 1996, 51)

Farm labourers who had little or no schooling were certainly not unskilled. They displayed what Scribner (1994) referred to as *working intelligence* to refer to the situated, non-literal know-how and knowledge that workers acquire on the job. For example, Gibson (1996, 53) described the activities of an unschooled farmworker ('Migiel Hendriks') who was a skilled wagon-maker, among other things. In his own descriptions it is clear that his know-how was not simply the capacity to mechanically replicate a task he had already performed, but included the ability to distil principles and apply them to new contexts. Thus Hendriks was able to build a wagon on demand, "unlike any other on the farm" (Gibson 1996, 53) To do so, he drew on a situated understanding of "the distribution of weights, leverage, two-and three dimensional constructions and spatial thinking" (Gibson 1996, 55). Gibson suggested that Hendriks, had mastered "a great many of the same skills, behaviours and ways of thinking that we associate with literacy, despite not having "mastery of, or fluent control over, a secondary discourse involving print" (Gibson 1996, 55). As he described it in answer to a question,

The boss said what kind of wagon he wanted. Then I went and sat down and thought about how I was going to build it. For this kind of wagon, with a shorter *bak* (load box) it costs less and makes it lighter if you use only one axle. But the axle must be in the correct place or the wagon will also tip over. It depends on where you attach the jack, how long and heavy the jack is. If the *jackie* is light, you put the axle more to the back. If the jack is heavy, the axle must be more to the front. Otherwise it will tip over or it

will lift the tractor... When I finally made the wagon I knew exactly how I was going to go about it (Gibson 1996, 53).

Asked about how he worked out how much material was needed, he replied

MH: I may not be able to read or write, but I use something I have learned in one case and adapt it (*pas dit aan*) a bit to fit in another case (laughs). When I looked at that first wagon, I measured it and calculated how much I would need to make it. Then I adapted (*pas aan*) those measurements to the second and third and fourth wagons I made. By the second wagon I almost always ordered the correct amount of material (Gibson, 1996, 55).

He demonstrated to Gibson how he was able to make fairly complex numerical calculations using his own strategies for deriving totals and working out costs. Such 'skilled practical thinking', following Scribner (1984, 39), "is goal-directed and varies adaptively with the changing properties of problems and changing conditions in the task environment".

Supportive findings to Gibson's were reported in a SoUL study of literacy and communication in a factory that produced handmoulded products out of life-threatening material containing asbestos. In their consideration of worker 'know-how' in a factory, Breier and Sait (1996) argued that 'unskilled' workers employed their own specialised knowledge rather than the 'official' or espoused strategies of the company, with considerable efficiency, and in ways similar to the contextually developed, informal strategies of dairy workers in Boston, as described by Scribner (1984). Workers with little or no schooling had shared ways of accurately applying such concepts as percentages, targets and performance criteria which relied on their 'seeing' and 'feeling' the amount of work that corresponded to specific measures.

Literacy, however, featured more overtly within the conflictual workplace dynamics in the factory than was the case on the farm. Written safety signs, in their design, language and positioning appeared to be directed at outsiders (visitors and inspectors) rather than at workers who were not fluent English language speakers. Workers worked under dangerous conditions, with asbestos waste, and suffered as a result. Complex health reporting and monitoring forms made it possible for workers' rising levels of lung-damage to be discounted and not responded to in particular cases that the researchers described. For example, the safety representative's ability to register problems was limited by the way the forms he had to fill in were designed, preventing him from identifying in detail particular dangerous practices which were not already listed in the form. Management placed the blame for poor communication and

industrial relations problems at the factory on the workers' individual literacy deficits. Yet the written texts that it produced for the workers' benefit were out of touch with workers' concerns and interests and appeared to be designed for purposes of regulation and control, rather than communication. Breier and Sait concluded that management could have more effectively addressed communication and productivity concerns by paying attention to existing worker discourses and practices, rather than hoping that a general literacy program for workers, brought in from the outside and run by persons who had no other link with the factory, would on its own improve understanding and communication. However, management intentions to address communicative issues were complicated by the safety and control issues that the researchers identified. Management's chosen route of bringing in outsiders to run a basic literacy programme would not effectively address concerns about communication but nor would it confront management with the contradictions in its own practices.

Literacy and local networks

SoUL researchers, following the work of Fingeret (1983), found that literacy tasks were commonly joint achievements, within peer and family groups, as well as in broader social networks. Fingeret (1983) argued that literacy practices, particularly amongst working class and poor people, were not performed by individuals acting in isolation. Instead they were carried out within social networks characterized by the exchange of resources: people with more exposure to schooling or with experientially-acquired specialist literacy skills, such as experience with filling-in or processing particular kinds of written application, would at times share their technical expertise with members of their social network. Sometimes such sharing would involve relations of dependency, rather than reciprocity, but interdependent (balanced exchange) relations were more frequent in Fingeret's (1983) study. The SoUL researchers thus paid attention to processes of mediation and the roles of literacy mediators. In this regard, Malan's (1996a; 1996b) Newtown and Bellville South studies, Robin's (1996) in Namaqualand and China and Robin's (1996) study in Marconi Beam were particularly productive.

Literacy mediation, in the sense used in these studies, refers to those occasions when people engage in literacy practices on behalf of others. Following the work of Baynham (1993, 1995), an important aspect of literacy mediation is that it often involves what he called *code-switching* (shifting from one language to another) and also *mode-switching* (typically, from activities involving reading and writing to talk about these activities, and back again). Mode-switching could also be about switching across written, visual, and other sign modalities

besides the spoken. The forms of literacy mediation reported in the SoUL studies involved not only shifts between languages such as between Xhosa and English but also between varieties and dialects of language, for example, between Cape Afrikaans (an informal variety associated with Coloured people in the Cape, and seldom written) and standard Afrikaans that is thought fitting for written communication, and similarly with other languages. Such mediation also often required the capacity to cross from local or informal discourses to formal codes, and back again. Access to and familiarity with local discourses, as well as local legitimacy in one form or other, were found to be essential attributes of a literacy mediator. Effective mediation was always context and discourse specific and the possession of decontextualized 'literacy skills' was not, by itself, enough.

Malan drew on Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogical communication, which she found useful for analyzing the relationship between literacy and power in Newtown and Bellville South. As she summarized, Bakhtin distinguished between centripetal tendencies towards the integration and unification of meaning, and centrifugal forces which open space for dialogue and multiple ways of taking and making meaning (Malan, 1996a, 106). She found that the centripetal forces that furthered monologic meaning in her sites of study were located in local government offices, schools, law courts and their attendant sites of practice, and in mainstream churches. They used standard written and spoken Afrikaans. Centrifugal tendencies were part of local social practice at other sites, in the streets, houses, cafés and churches where informal Afrikaans was spoken and there was space for dialogue and *heteroglossia*, or multiple voices. Such sites were not free-for-alls where anyone could participate, however. 'Insider-knowledge' of local ways of speaking and acting was required for people to be able to participate and to know what was going on. Many of the literacy practices of Newtown, a 'Coloured' residential suburb in a small Eastern Cape town, involved mediation on the part of persons who were institutionally located, conversant in standard Afrikaans and familiar with specialist literacy practices. These included clerks and officials in shops, banks, the post office, the municipality and the legal system (Malan, 1996a, 197). They also included religious leaders and local politicians. Effective literacy mediation required persons to have both informal, 'insider knowledge' as well as a grasp of the formal registers of the various 'outsider' institutions. Malan found that the local clerks and officials were often expert at translating language varieties and local forms of expression into the formal written registers. She gave examples of these mediation processes, from the magistrate's court to the local pharmacy, where mediators interpreted people's legal and health concerns into institutional procedures and products. Such 'insider knowledge' was a necessary corollary to

having what Malan called “local legitimacy”, that is, people who were well regarded and had influence amongst the people of Newtown.

Malan's study of Bellville South, a suburb of greater Cape Town, found that literacy was largely not noticeable on the streets and in the public spaces of this mostly working class residential area. At a domestic level Malan (1996b, 143) described literacy as “hidden” because it was mostly a practice of women in their homes. Men in the suburb, most of whom were unemployed, spent their time on the streets during the day, whereas women spent their time in their homes, where they could 'cover themselves' in “respectability” (Malan, 1996b 143). Women's reading included magazines and romantic novels. At a local institutional level, literacy was part of pension payouts and church practices. The literacy of pension payouts was mediated for pensioners by pension officials. As one woman explained, “What I don't know I ask someone who knows.... I just make a cross. Then they (the officials) chap chap (they stamp the form).” (Malan, 1996b, 146)

Outside the pension office a less formal range of hawkers, debt collectors and relatives engaged, with the pensioners after pay-out, in various literacy-linked encounters, such as the taking-out or paying-up of burial insurance, with the attendant documentation. The literacy practices described here are heterogeneous and heteroglossic, written through and through with complexity and difference, and with complex and diffuse power dynamics.

In church activities Malan found that a range of formal literacy-linked practices characterized certain events, like the parts of funerals which happened in church, with ordained ministers officiating. Such events included ritualized readings of high status texts, such as the Scriptures. The accompanying home-based funeral rituals, which were also an integral part of local funeral practices, were led by lay-preachers who did not read from texts, and who used local language forms.

In Marconi Beam, a shack settlement in Cape Town, China and Robins (1996) found that the bureaucratization of local politics excluded many while at the same time providing some people with opportunities for social mobility and power. Access to local state power in Marconi Beam required a variety of attributes including social position, a facility in more formal political and development discourses and language registers, as well as school literacy. China and Robins found, however, that some local residents had, through experience in 'struggle politics', developed familiarity with oppositional discourses, making it possible for them to occupy positions as local cultural brokers, mediating local concerns and understandings with the developmental and political discourses of local government and

development institutions. Their abilities to mediate dominant development and political discourses and the official or standardized literacies of local government and other institutions on behalf of local residents facilitated their access to social power at a local institutional level (China and Robins 1966, 162-5).

At a more local, everyday level, examples of family, friends and local officials assisting with specific tasks were numerous, e.g., people without schooling who ran their own businesses used trusted associates as mediators of literacy and as translators. A person who trained taxi owners in business skills explained this to Breier, Taetsane and Sait (1996: 219):

Often on this course we get requests: 'I am a taxi owner, may I bring my wife or daughter or son with me'. Then you know this is an illiterate, or a barely or semi-literate person. We always say of course, if they are involved in the running of the business. And then we treat them as one unit.

Kell's study of an unschooled social activist living in Site 5, a shack settlement near Hout Bay, outside Cape Town, showed how shifts in the national landscape had local effects. The bureaucratization of the ANC since its unbanning in 1990 had disempowered previously competent social organizers and activists, such as the subject of Kell's study. In the early 1990s, Winnie Tsotso suddenly found herself labelled "illiterate" although she was dealing with ANC membership forms and documents on a daily basis, and had been an activist and organiser for a decade before that. Classified a 'beginner' by the literacy teachers at the Night School in Site 5, Winnie Tsotso acted as a community advice worker and cultural mediator for her community as a whole. She drew on the literacy skills of her daughters where they were needed, and on the specialist skills of human rights lawyers, for legal and documentary literacies, as well on her own knowledge, informally acquired:

While I am talking to Winnie, a stream of people come in and out of the house, asking for things...Winnie goes to a cupboard and takes out a tin and riffles through some papers in it, while the person watches. I notice that the tin contains numerous documents. "No" she says, "your identity document has not yet arrived"... "Is this your clinic card?"... "Here is your ANC membership card" (Kell 1996: 235).

Winnie also ran a soup kitchen for old-age pensioners from her shack in conjunction with Catholic Welfare and Development (CWD). Kell (1996: 24) described 'one day' at Winnie's job:

One day a deliveryman from CWD came around with the vegetables and gas cylinder that she needed. Winnie brought out her invoice book, and the deliveryman wrote

down what she had bought. Afterwards she told me that she owed R200. She told me exactly how she was going to pay this back and when. She said that her daughter Portia would check what he had written. I showed her a few of the words on the invoice and we sounded them out. She actually read about half of them, and more with a bit of help. As I left Portia came out of another room, picked up the book without a word between her and her mother and ran through the page very quickly.

The mediation processes going on in these examples are complex. Winnie, despite her own 'illiteracy', played a powerful role as a discursive literacy mediator in the bureaucratic processes on which so many people depended (involving pension procedures, clinic cards, ID applications, voter registration, etc.). She in turn depended on her daughter who played the role of technical literacy mediator in decoding documents for her when necessary. The deliveryman played a role as a literacy mediator when he filled in the invoice for her. The literacy activities were distributed in ways consistent with the activities and social relationships of which they were a part. In these processes Tsotso was a leader, rather than the reliant dependant described in the stereotype of the adult illiterate.

The Contexts of Literacy Acquisition

SoUL researchers paid particular attention to evidence and accounts of unschooled adults developing literacy-linked capabilities and found that the learning of (often narrow) task-specific literacies in the course of task completion was the most frequent and sustaining form of literacy acquisition. Following Lave and Wenger (1991), the research described these as 'apprenticeship processes', because these literacies were learnt from other people, they were context-specific, and their acquisition was analogous to the ways crafts are learnt, in that they were learnt and used under guidance, in the everyday course of events. In addition to apprenticeship acquisition processes, some researchers examined sites of formal learning, or adult literacy classes. Examples of people consciously and deliberately teaching themselves about reading and writing were also evident, as in the example cited by Robins (1996, 127) of a man who taught himself to read and write by studying a newspaper and getting help from his employer when he was stuck.

Experiences of formal literacy learning

Adult literacy day classes and night schools were of interest to SoUL researchers as sites of literacy practice where people were inducted into standardized literacy. Findings here related to the wider research which showed the variety, complexity and embeddedness of literacy in other contexts.

Kell (1996), for example, argued that the literacy that was being taught in the night school at the informal 'squatter' settlement at Site 5 did not articulate with the existing literacy practices in any of the other domains studied within the community, nor with any of the learners' specific reasons for wanting to attend night school. It became clear that outside of the night school classes the learners were only reading their schoolwork and that what they were doing in school was highly encapsulated, and defined by the discursive practices of schooled literacy.

Kell (1996) found that, what she called, 'Night School literacy' was insulated from the literacy practices within the other domains identified in her study and questioned the value of a pedagogy which focuses on the transfer of disembedded cognitive skills. In a context where schooled literacy only has relevance to the domain of 'local development' (where exchanges between local community leaders and wider civic and local government personnel are characterized by procedural uses of texts and 'development' discourses), Kell (1996) argued, the acquisition of 'mainstream' literacy practices, through about four hours a week of night school attendance was going to be extremely difficult. She argued that the Night School promoted pedagogical practices which were very new to the adult learners (since they had not had any opportunities to engage with those practices in other domains of their lives) putting impossible demands on them as learners, and making them feel inadequate when they could not cope with those demands.

In her discussion of literacy in Bellville South, Malan reinforced the distinction made by other SoUL studies between literacy practices in 'everyday life' and the literacies of school and adult literacy classes. She discussed in detail an example of an eighty-year old woman who attended a neighbourhood adult literacy class. The woman performed basic writing tasks such as writing up the date on the blackboard with a mixture of shyness, ineptitude and embarrassment. Back in the privacy of her home she revealed to Malan that she regularly engaged in literacy practices that required coding and decoding skills far in advance of what she was learning in the night-school. She read the Bible fluently, had written letters on behalf of relatives, she paid her own accounts and had successfully applied for a house on her own:

When I asked Rietjie how she managed to perform these tasks she said that she did not know how this came about, but that I should not tell the teacher. "I want the teacher to teach me starting at the beginning"... For Rietjie, attending literacy classes was motivated by a desire to acquire the attributes associated with schooling: schooling is a linear process which 'begins at the beginning' and leads to a layered recognition of

ability. The social distance between the literacy teacher and the learners was a vital element of this process (Malan, 1996b, 152).

Malan's analysis suggests that the investments Rietjie made in the adult literacy class far exceeded any returns she could realistically have expected. What shaped her commitment, Malan says, was the 'literacy myth' (Graff, 1979) transposed to the context of schooling: a belief in the promise of social transformation that the schooling experience delivered, even if acquired so late in life; "a progression from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, truancy to self-respect" (Malan, 1996, 152).

Situated literacies and school literacies

In most of the areas and sites of the SoUL research it became clear that outside of formal school there were few opportunities for adults to be socialized into mainstream literacy practices. There were few observations of children being scaffolded into school-like ways of reading and writing in the home. Such scaffolding practices are frequently described by researchers as critical for later school success (Snow, 1983; Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1986). There were very few texts around them in their homes which required schooled literacy, and those that were there were usually very specific to particular social practices, and often with a formulaic quality, like invitations, posters and forms. The research showed that many people with schooling chose to get others to fill in these texts, because of factors unrelated to their literacy competencies. Personal, individualized reading and writing that is traditionally seen as literacy hardly existed in most cases. Where it did, as amongst women reading fiction in Bellville South (Malan 1996b), or mothers helping children on the farms (Gibson 1996) it had by no means led to empowerment. In fact, the way in which it had become gendered had rendered it powerless. Further, the chance to practice the literacy that some people had managed to learn, in school, in adult education classes and through informal learning, was often not there, or was withheld and denied (Watters 1996; Breier and Sait 1996). The SoUL research suggested that in contexts like those in the studies presented, it may involve setting learners up for failure in expecting them to learn schooled literacy without providing the institutional context of the school itself for grounding and locating that literacy learning.

Divergent orientations towards schooling

Cultural and ideological orientations away from schooling were prominent in the narratives of many people, particularly older males, to whom SoUL researchers spoke. For many men who had been initiated into a migrant worker culture when they were young, schools were the preserve of women and children but not men for whom the real work of their childhoods was to look after cattle and sheep (China and Robins 1996; Mpoyiya and Prinsloo 1996). Leaving school was positively associated with the social and cultural constructions and practices of masculine identity, with rituals of initiation into manhood and with the start of manual labour, in particular. Some men, by then middle-aged and older, told SoUL researchers of their running away as youths from school and home, in defiance of their mothers and fathers, to go and work on the mines. Their incentives to do so were the sight of their erstwhile colleagues who had left school enjoying the status associated with being recognized as men. The narratives of these older men contained details of the complexities and specificities of their literacy uses. Unschooled men who would be classified illiterate under the 'great divide' approach made use of literacy in domain-specific ways, through work, family and church practices. A corollary of their orientation away from schooling, together with their context-specific uses of literacy, was the fact that they did not generally suffer from being stigmatized as illiterate. Their sense of status and dignity was related to other valued cultural attributes (with being wage-earning men, family heads, church leaders, and so on).

Amongst younger people a diverse range of orientations to literacy and schooling was communicated to SoUL researchers, with the same person sometimes expressing contradictory views. The call by the new government for people to return to school did not appeal to everybody:

You see, Mandela, what does he say? He says we must all study. I mean I don't criticize him - that we must all study...We can all sing but we can't all talk. You see those who were studying, we were helping them as well in the struggle...killing the Boers at that time, you see if we all went to school who would have worried about the Boers...If we were all at school and not worrying about the struggle would Mandela have been out of prison? Never! The reason Mandela was released was because there were people [like myself] outside causing havoc so the Whites had to release him, you see. Now Mandela is out of prison he says we must go to school (China and Robins 1996: 168).

This speaker, now living, at the time of interview, on his wits as a petty gangster in Marconi Beam, was once a student activist, one of the generation of militant youths or 'Young Lions' who gave up on schooling to fight the larger battle against apartheid. Like many others he was

left stranded by the transition in the country, alienated from the politics of the 1990s, and had found refuge, resources and power within the *tsotsi* underworld (Glaser, 1990)

The assumption that the mass of South Africa's people would start to take advantage of the new opportunities for learning, should they become widely available, must be seriously challenged by these kinds of complex orientations to schooling. Further, once people have taken that step into formal education, the discursive space of the adult classroom is populated, as the SoUL research on night schools shows, with all of the ambivalences, desires and expectations that arise from conflicting orientations to schooling.

Ways of Knowing and Communicating without Schooling

The SoUL research developed a preliminary typology of the key dynamics that described the strategies and practices of unschooled adults, as they participated in literacy events. These were:

- the affirmation by socially- situated persons, who might not have attended school for long or at all, of 'local knowledge' and 'common-sense' as a valued capacity which was seen as being common amongst people without formal learning, and less common amongst educated persons ;
- the complex role of literacy mediators in mediating the literacy- or discourse-specific aspects of collective social practices; and
- the fact of apprenticeship learning (which involves guided participation and participatory appropriation) as the key mode of informal acquisition of literacy and discourse-linked capabilities.

The SoUL research was in large part funded by the Joint Education Trust, a consortium of representatives from industry and the African National Congress. The published book on the research (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996) was presented to a senior official from the Ministry of Education in a ceremony in Johannesburg, shortly after its publication. The responses to the work at an official level were very faint, however, and the setting up of a formal system of ABET provision as part of the National Qualifications Framework proceeded as previously planned, despite criticism. Cathy Kell and I wrote an invited position paper for the Deputy Minister of Education (Prinsloo and Kell, 1998b) outlining our perspective on the Minister's

plans and expectations for quick results from an adult literacy campaign, but again, our intervention had no immediate impact.

Conclusion: 'Social practices' as a framing concept for situated studies of literacy practices

At the level of epistemological development, the SoUL work drew very strongly on the 'first generation' studies of literacy as situated social practice (Street, 1984, Heath, 1983, Scribner and Cole (1981). The concept of *social practices* worked to signal the contextually variable and situated nature of reading and writing practices across contexts, which ethnographic study showed to be the case.

The SoUL studies aimed to be not just reports on what was found at a local level, but were interpretive attempts to make sense of the data from a theoretically informed perspective that took account of the relation between local and larger social contexts. In this sense these studies were different from the more localized studies available as models, such those of Barton and Ivanic (1991) and Heath (1983), where larger societal processes were only obliquely referred to. Those studies had a greater focus on contained, locally elaborated and apparently internally consistent communities.

While the SoUL research followed a case study approach, it did not make sense for the researchers to study people in socio-economic (or socio-political) isolation. There were no 'local literacies' that were not variations of or reactions to dominant forms, uses and valuations of literacy located beyond the local. For example, the wine farms, in Gibson's study could be seen as 'total institutions' (Goffman, 1961; Nasson, 1988; Du Toit, 1991) that absorbed and regulated all aspects of labourers' lives, including their domestic and reproductive relations. But these labourers also linked into kinship networks that spread beyond the farms where they worked. The farms themselves were linked to other farms in networks of competition and co-operation, including the flow and control of labour across farms. The farm workers were also part of town-farm dynamics and were a part of the broader social dynamics around agribusiness, and shifts in political attitudes to the question of the unionization of farm labour (Gibson 1996). Similarly, Robins' (1996) study of goat farmers showed that they were able to construct a complex coalition of goat farmers, local dignitaries, development non-government organizations, and lawyers. This coalition aided the farmers in their court battle to resist encampment and to retain mobile, collective grazing rights. The older people Mpoyiya and Prinsloo (1996) interviewed in Khayelitsha were part of immediate family and kinship networks that linked urban and rural contexts in multiple and complex ways. Similar points can be made in each case study that was part of the SoUL research. In other words, the people

in the SoUL studies all lived within and took meaning from complicated social networks that linked them to social dynamics far beyond their localities. Literacy thus never simply took locally constructed forms but was shaped in complex ways by wider dynamics. The power associated with school literacy loomed large across these various, intermeshing social practices, but was never closely examined in the SoUL research. A subsequent criticism of the SoUL perspectives was that schooling operated as a negative but largely unexamined ‘other’, in contrast to the ‘everyday’ literacies which were valorized in various ways in the SoUL work (Green, 1997, personal communication).²

The SoUL studies drew explicitly on a particular perspective on social networks, influenced by interactional anthropology and drawn from the work of Fingeret (1983) as discussed earlier, to explain how everyday literacies were shared and collective, and where such networks were seen as the product of people's interactions. However, the SoUL research found that the dynamics of literacy in shared social practice, while revealing relations of interdependency and dependency, also reflected relationships of power and inequality in ways that were not spelt out in Fingeret's (1983) model, and nor was the extent to which they were shaped by wider forces outside the immediate network, in addition to power dynamics within the immediate network. Nor were these relationships of power and inequality adequately captured in the apprenticeship model of learning and acquisition offered by Lave and Wenger (1991), where the relationship between apprentice and master is fundamentally a benign one, and the movement of learners is from a peripheral status to an already constituted centre. The dynamics encountered in the SoUL research, as I have summarized them here, were far more uneven, hybrid and sometimes dispersed and fragmented than Lave and Wenger's (1981) model would have suggested.

For these reasons I apply a further developed understanding of networks and social practices in the following chapters, where I examine the ways external relationships are themselves implicit in the construction of local networks. I examine arguments that such networks are less the products of people's voluntaristic interaction but involve the intermeshing of people, artefacts, constructs, social technologies, language, space and time in particular ways that are in turn tied to dynamics of power and control. As I elaborate, with regard to the writings of Latour (1997, 1993) in the next chapter, these networks of interaction are not just discursively constructed in relationships between people but are just as much embedded in material and technological relations amongst and between people. Such a theoretical turn, from a social

² This criticism was made to me in conversation by Dr Bill Green, an Australian literacy and educational scholar, after my presentation on the SoUL work at a seminar in Geelong, Australia, in 1997.

constructionist perspective to a social ontology that sees the social as a product of the nexus of relations between social practices and material relations provides a sharper analytical framework for studying literacy as situated social practice. This work involves a more sustained theorization and application of social practices theory, going beyond a study of 'everyday practices' to a broader application of social practices theory, drawing from sociological, anthropological and linguistic literature, to develop a perspective on the way local and wider social dynamics are linked through the concepts of 'practices' and 'networks'. In the following chapters, then, a continuous thread of examination and enquiry relates to this concern with understanding and theorizing the links between local and wider social practices as they impact on reading and writing practices.

The work that follows in this investigation was an extension and elaboration of the perspectives opened up by the SoUL research for the study of literacy in South Africa³. I enquired as to how the particular orientations to reading and writing brought by various Europeans were encountered and received by local people under pre-colonial and colonial social conditions (chapters four and five); I studied details of early childhood literacy, as regards the first reception and appropriation of reading and writing by small children in school and out-of-school settings (chapters six and seven) ; and, lastly, I studied the new literacies associated with digital, screen-based technologies and the internet (chapter eight).

³ Cathy Kell, who contributed a study to the SoUL project continued with further work involving ethnographic research and adult literacy learning and practices (Kell, 2001; 2000).

Further application of the social practices approach to literacy in South Africa

(i) The historical study of literacy as situated social practice:

Chapter Four: Tenuous literacies. Pre-colonial and early colonial literacy encounters

In this chapter I further develop the conceptual resources for the study of literacy that I developed in the preceding chapters. I then go on to use these resources in the study of literacy in historical contexts in South Africa, over two chapters. I start by briefly summarizing the literature which argues that the concept of *social practice* provides a way through certain key problems in contemporary social theory, to do with structure and agency.

Materiality, agency and social practices

Over several decades, social theory has struggled to understand orderliness and change in the social world in relation to human knowledge and activity in the material world. Key moves in this debate, as presented by Bourdieu (1977, 1991) and Giddens (1990) and summarized by Reckwitz (2002) have been as follows: In classical sociology of knowledge (in Durkheim and some interpretations of Marx, and Marxism) the material was manifest in 'social structures' (in the division of labour) that provided a foundation for orders of knowledge. The cultural was determined and epiphenomenal; its cause was the material.

In structuralist social theory, in contrast, material phenomena were dealt with by analyzing systems of classification. As represented in the work of Levi Strauss (1962), the place of symbolic order is identical with the plane of collective thought. Systems of classification, schemes or codes are understood to determine what can or cannot become an object within language and action. Structuralism thus redefined the material as 'objects of knowledge' or 'symbolic objects', as objects that become visible in the context of systems of meaning, as expressed through categories, discourse and communicative action. Subsequent versions of post-structuralism, variously associated with Derrida (1976), Foucault (1972) and Baudrillard (Reckwitz, 2002, 196), understood the idea of the material from a perspective that saw reality as socially constituted. The material was now no longer presented as the locus for the formation of social structures and consequent cultural patterns, but as a carrier of cultural symbols.

Bourdieu (1991) argued that the main problem with such post-structuralist approaches was the conceptualization of materiality as objects of knowledge: that material things exist for us only within contingent systems of difference, within interpretative schemes that are removed from, or in some way prior to, social engagement. Bourdieu (1991) identified both materialist and

structuralist epistemologies, as summarized above, as *objectivist* epistemologies which seek to construct the objective relations which structure practices and representations. Bourdieu and other contemporary anthropologists (Rosaldo, 1993), sociologists (Giddens, 1990a, 1990b) philosophers (Schatzki, 2000; Schatzki et al, 2001) and sociologists of scientific practice (Latour, 1987, 1993; Law, 1994, 2002; Bowker and Starr, 1999; 2003) presented alternatives to the culturalist and materialist perspectives of the theorists described above. In social practice theory as it is commonly associated with the work of Bourdieu, in particular, the social is not primarily located in the mind nor discourses nor symbolic interactions, but in 'social practices'. A specific structure or order is given to social institutions or social fields by the ways people think, act and interact, and such human activity is simultaneously structured by institutional forces, such that it cannot be said that the one precedes the other.

In Bourdieu's terms, social fields are constituted by interactions among individuals holding relative positions of social power within such fields. The social and material conditions that pertain in individual's experience, and in collective history, dispose individuals in certain ways, rather than others, which both enable and constrain them in particular ways. Individuals bring to those interactions their *habitus*, which is made up of those durable, transposable dispositions, or embodied history internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history (Bourdieu 1991, 12). *Habitus* reflects those possibilities and resources, and their limitations which people tacitly draw upon in their actions and interactions. *Habitus* also refers to a person's competence as a strategic player in a social field, and how such personal resources are continually being sanctioned by relative successes and failures in social interaction. A notion of social practice that draws on the concept of *habitus* sees language and literacy production not as the outcome of static norms or pre-given social and cognitive techniques, but rather the effects of the positioning of individuals within a linguistic, conceptual 'market' (Bourdieu 1991, ch 1). *Habitus* outlines a mechanism of regulated behaviour as well as for structured creativity on the part of individuals. For Bourdieu (1977, 72) collective social practice is an outcome of a practical consensus, rather than a *mental* consensus based on identical mental inputs. Communicative practices do not have to arrive at common meanings at all.

This distinction is an important one for my present purposes, as it relates to the complexities involved in reactions to literacy in cross-cultural encounters. I examine the complexities of local responses to literacy in pre-colonial and colonial South Africa in this and the next chapter, where I draw on this emphasis on the variability and hybridity that is frequently shown to have been the outcome of such literacy encounters and how it is taken hold of. I

show how Europeans' descriptions of Africans in relation to literacy are constrained by the cultural models they held of the people and processes involved, and how these representations are frequently undermined in particular cross-cultural encounters. Similarly, I show how mental constructs of literacy and how it works in contexts of cultural encounters are contradicted by narrative accounts of actual experiences and uses.

Latour's analysis of networked practices (1987, 1993) can be understood as similar to Bourdieu's (1990), and as a critique of those earlier moves in the sociology of knowledge where social order was reduced to dematerialized symbolic orders or where the material was reduced to objects of interpretation. Latour's 'symmetrical anthropology' suggests an approach to the theorization of the material (and the technological) not as a social structure or as symbolic objects, but as *artefacts*, as 'things' which are necessary components of social networks or 'practices'. Latour's work at a general level points to the contingent circumstances within which knowledge is produced, and the importance of historically trailing the development of knowledge (he is concerned with the practice of science) and the microanalysis of its production within sites of practice. In this he covers related ground to that covered by Foucault (1972, 1981), Bourdieu (1977, 1990), Giddens (1990a, 199b) and others.

Latour studies ethnographically the resources that are mobilized to establish an object of knowledge: the configuration of people, devices, texts, decisions, organizations and inter-organizational relations, in varying degrees of extensiveness and complexity. He follows the chain of events, actors and artefacts, including documents, institutional domains, activities of experts and access to these by "non-experts" (Latour, 1987; Hamilton, 2001). For Latour, networks combine in particular ways to produce objects, knowledge and machines, as well as facts, but only those which fit. Dissenting voices are rendered marginal or invisible. A consequent feature of such networks is that they draw local actors into broader configurations not of their making, and which play out away from the local scene. Latour's work draws attention to the situations where this work gets done, "where humans and non-humans are constructed as equivalent to assure that these networks stick together" (Bowker and Star, 1999, 301).

The example of the construction of literacy within the autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984, 1995) as I described it in chapter one is one example where a particular nexus of practices, categories and arrangements of materials is presented as inevitable and as having direct and uniform consequences for people. Another example of how such an analytical perspective on projects of social ordering might apply to literacy studies is provided by Freebody (1999, 5) where he referred to the four ways in which the sociality of any given

literacy practice is constituted. First, he says, each literacy practice has a material history, which is found in the writing materials and systems and the material traces they leave. Secondly, literacy practices are social through the interactional histories through which they have evolved. A third sense relates to their institutional histories. A fourth sense in which literacy practices are social, says Freebody, is that these material, interactional and institutional histories are themselves shaped by ideological considerations. Yet, as Freebody (2001) points out, literacy very often appears in policy discourses and schooling practices as an apparently inevitable and almost natural 'compacted concept', i.e., literacy comes to be seen as apparently self-evident, uncontentious and useful, its substance and validity confirmed and endorsed repeatedly by statistical correlations with one or other social good.

As such a compacted concept, literacy is commonly thought of as a unitary process where 'readers' and 'writers' are generalized subjects without any social location, and who are more or less efficient processors of text. Hamilton (2001) makes a related case, applying the New Literacy Studies and the ideas of Latour to the study of the International Adult Literacy Survey developed in OECD countries since 1997. She sees the survey as constructing and solidifying "an international 'regime of truth' which develops through techniques of standardized assessment and testing and which in turn is organizing national and local knowledge about what literacy is" (Hamilton, 2001, 178).

For Latour (1987) the distinction between micro-interactions and macro-structures dissolves itself when looked at from the perspective of actor networks. What we find instead is a 'flat' stratum of social practices in which material things and constructed categories are routinely drawn upon and applied by different agents in different situations. Their social significance consists not only in their being 'interpreted', but also in their being 'handled' in certain ways and in their being constitutive, effective elements of social practices. Reckwitz (2002) suggests that the objects and hybrids of material and social practice handled again and again endure, thus making social reproduction beyond temporal and spatial limits possible.

Bourdieu's (1977) perspective on *habitus* is endorsed in such arguments, but attention is drawn to the place of material artefacts as well as to the categorization practices that occur in the production of dispositions through experience.

Latour's emphasis on the networked nature of social/material processes has considerable explanatory power¹, as does Bourdieu's model of social practice for examining the market

¹ While Latour first described his work as 'actor-network theory' I do not use the term here because Latour later famously expressed his dissatisfaction with the term. "There are four things that do not work with actor-network theory; the word actor, the word network, the word theory and the hyphen!" (Latour, 1997, 2)

and power relations involved in particular literacy practices. I draw on Latour in particular in this and the following chapter, where I examine historical understandings of literacy. In chapters six and seven I examine and draw on socio-cultural theories of cognitive processes in the context of the study of children's early literacy. I examine and develop there ideas drawn from the work of Bakhtin (1981) and socio-cultural and socio-cognitive models of cognition based on the work of Vygotsky (1978) that continue beyond the perspectives opened up by Scribner and Cole (1981) and Lave and Wenger (1991), as already discussed. I conclude by outlining how there remains an unresolved epistemological and methodological tension between perspectives that examine the local and those that are concerned to explain how the local is embedded in wider dynamics. I draw on a distinction made between the practices of 'looking up' as a research orientation, where sense is made of local dynamics in relation to larger realities, and 'looking down', where the focus is on local complexity, and difference (Law and Mol, 2002), and favour the research practice of 'looking down', on the argument that the macro dimension, that of colonialism or globalization as overarching concepts, involves an abstraction from concrete practices which are varied in their specifics, details and effects. I draw out the implications of this conceptual perspective for the study of literacy, its acquisition, distribution, status and effects, in multiple instances.

At the core of my argument about literacy processes and effects is the point that there is a necessary indeterminacy in these processes, both in what reading and writing practices come to mean in specific settings, and also at the level of how meaning is taken and made in individual acts of reading or writing. The social practices perspective on literacy as I develop it in the course of this study provides the resources to study these processes in a way that can account for those indeterminate dynamics. The point needs to be emphasized at the same time that this is not an exercise of purely academic interest. As I show, the model of literacy as a basic skill that is directly transmitted in uniform ways is an assumption that plagues effective educational delivery at various educational sites.

The study of literacy and colonialism in southern Africa as networked social practices

Drawing on the theoretical debate outlined above, I consider historical questions to do with literacy's role in South Africa under particular conditions and circumstances. I make clear, at the start, what my starting orientation towards the study of literacy in historical context is by comparing it to two other influential ways of approaching literacy in historical study.

An influential meta-narrative about literacy is that it was brought by Europeans, in the 17th, 18th and particularly the 19th centuries to local people (in South Africa and elsewhere) who

were, until then, living in a timeless, homeostatic present, locked in an unmediated engagement with their life-world. Literacy, Christianity and European civilization brought to these people the potentials of culture, history, development, reason, progress and modernization, as well as the capacity for alienation (Ong, 1992). Literacy was a fundamental part of this legacy, the critical gateway through which locals irrevocably crossed into a new conceptual and cultural world. This is the story of the 'civilizing mission' of the 19th century, and such assumptions were typical of most of the Europeans in Africa at the time, including missionaries, adventurers, linguists, natural scientists and educators, traders and colonial officials. (De Kock, 1996)

A second way the story of literacy and indigenous people has been told has been to see it through the lens of colonial and imperial conquest. From this perspective literacy is seen as the discursive adjunct to a coercive process: Literacy was a gateway through which the subjugated local people were pushed into a new world where they were cognitively re-orientated and individuated. A conquered people, they were further distanced from their experiential life-world, through the alienating resources of literacy: they were persuaded to accept the colonizers' own myths about civilization and progress, namely, that civilization and progress were products of European history as well as having universal application for other people. I elaborate on this perspective further in chapter five, in my examination of De Kock's (1996) thesis on the role of literacy in colonial change in the Eastern Cape where he presents this case, and which I argue against.

Implicit in both the above perspectives, which could be seen as two versions of the same story as regards literacy, is an autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984). Such a model, as I have explained it in chapter one, sees literacy working as a social technology in context-independent and linear ways, producing uniform cognitive and social consequences.

A third perspective has hardly yet been told by historians of African colonial experience². It is the argument developed in this chapter, and is as follows: alphabetic, print literacy, like colonialism, did not arrive as a unitary package, nor was received as such. Rather, it came embedded in a variety of situated contexts, networks, artefacts, relationships, assumptions and practices. These practices and commitments were imported from a European context where they had deep roots in established practices, social networks and material relations. But once transported, they very soon encountered different contexts, histories and practices, and

² Harries (2001) is the exception here. In an advance on his earlier work as regards the study of literacy (Harries, 1994), which I discussed in chapter two above, Harries (2001) draws on and applies an understanding of literacy as situationally variable social practice in this historical study which I examine in detail later in this chapter.

underwent changes that sometimes took by surprise those who had brought them. Print literacy, like Christianity was not simply transplanted in the African context to do its work, the way Ong (1982) and others (Goody, 1969; Havelock, 1976) suggested, but was translated, interpreted, recontextualized and re-embedded in a range of ways by local people. I survey those in this chapter. Such recontextualization processes were variable and uneven, depending on the social networks, power relations and mediating technologies that came to bear on their dynamics. By way of a close study of literacy as situated social practice in particular examples, I show that this third perspective provides a convincing and generative account of the way literacy practices take shape in new contexts as well as the ways such literacy practices extend networks of social and technological relationships into new spheres of influence. I thus examine how the resources developed for the study of literacy as situated social practice can be applied to the ethno-historical study of specific instances of social encounters that include literacy.

I focus selectively in this chapter on examples of early and pre-colonial encounters. I start by examining encounters with literacy on the part of local indigenous people under circumstances where European influence had not yet become hegemonic. Such 'border' cross-cultural, pre-colonial and early colonial encounters are of interest because they offer opportunity to examine the provisional and contingent dimensions of practices and procedures which later take on the appearance of being universal or natural. Such encounters and events are also useful to study because they provide opportunities to examine and interpret how literacy is put to use in the interests of asserting and contesting relations of domination, inequality and resistance.

I focus on networked interactions around literacy specifically in relation to the Bay of Natal on the southeast coast of Africa, in pre-colonial and early colonial times. I draw on supportive analyses and research of related dynamics from elsewhere in southern Africa to assist and extend my own analysis. This chapter thus focuses on pre-colonial and early colonial encounters, where literacy's effects, forms and functions in cross-cultural encounters are more tenuous, provisional, fluid, contradictory, paradoxical, counter-typical and thus more clearly visible for study, than they usually become in settled contexts where 'common-sense' in relation to literacy practices is more deeply rooted.

I both examine original sources and also examples of 19th century as well as contemporary historical studies that have relevance to my topic. The original sources I examine are mostly published and archived accounts by 19th century traders and missionaries in southern Africa, as well as the published interviews with older men that collect their accounts of Zulu history,

collected and compiled by James Stuart (1976), a magistrate in the colonial government of Natal, at the end of the 19th century.

Staking claims in Africa

For my purposes here I treat as a series of literacy events the multiple-sourced account below of the failed purchase in early colonial times of the ‘Bay of Natal’ (the site of the later harbour city of Durban). On the 4th of December 1689 the galiot *De Noord* arrived at the Bay of Natal, with “verbal and written instructions” given to the captain Gerbrantzer to rescue the shipwrecked crew of the *Stavenisse* and to purchase the bay from the local inhabitants. The details of this exercise are recounted in a dispatch sent by the Dutch governor of the Cape, Commander Simon van der Stel, to the Chamber of XVII of the Dutch East India Company, which owned the ship:

after embarking the crew of the “Stavenisse,” and solemnly purchasing that bay with some surrounding land from the king and chief of those parts for some merchandise, consisting of copper arm and neck rings and other articles, upon behalf of the Honourable Company, whose marks were set up in various places (“*der zelve wapen in verscheidene plaatsen opgerigt*”) and proper attention having been paid to everything, they sailed on the 11th January following, and four days later put into the so-called bay De la Goa...(translated from the Dutch, Bird, 1883, 54)

In this short quote, there are examples and mention of three distinct semiotic or enscription practices of which only the writing of documents might be thought of as literacy in the conventional sense. The beacons set up around the bay were also coded signs, which were apparently intended to signal possession or presence, however differently those signs might be read by local residents, or by other visiting European ships. Thirdly, the copper arm and neck rings, regarded as cheap trinkets by the Europeans were utilized by the Africans as signs that made their bodies into statements of identity and social place in a local economy of signs, not comprehended by the European sailors and traders, who only knew that these items had exchange value in this setting far in excess of their value in a European context.

My focus here is on the documents. The “written instructions” that van der Stel referred to above had been delivered to the captain of *De Noord*, and were notably specific in their detail. Apart from the instructions to clean the ship and proceed to the bay of Natal without delay, they included the following (translated from the Dutch by Bird, 1883, 56)

4. Watching a fit opportunity, you will enter into a negotiation with the chief or so-called Ingose, solemnly to purchase from him, for the Honourable Company, for beads, copper, ironmongery, and such other articles as they have a liking for, the bay natal and the adjoining land, and you will have

a deed of conveyance, “in communi et solemni formâ,” written by Lourens van Swaanswyk, passed before commissioned members of the ship's council, and signed by the said chief Ingose and some of his nearest relatives, taking good care that the articles of merchandise for which the bay and adjoining land is purchased are not noticed in the deed, except in general terms, and that the amount of the same be estimated at nineteen or twenty thousand guldens.

5. Having effected this, you will run down the coast, and endeavour to make the bay De la Goa, lying in from 33⁰ to 34⁰ S. latitude, and to ascertain whether, as stated by the Portuguese, and laid down in your charts, there is a round sandbank at the entrance; you will carefully sound the bay, and have a chart of it drawn by the quartermaster, Cornelius Hemerans.

6. With regard to securing the missing men of the 'Stavenisse,' and the purchase of this bay, you will use same precautions which are above dictated in the fourth article; and you will above all attend carefully to your duty, and to the interests of the Company, taking note of everything which may in any way be profitable or is worthy of remark, and having such things carefully entered into your log-book by Lourens van Swaanswyk.

What is immediately apparent is the role of writing in the intensely precise instructions from the Dutch East India Company to the ship's captain, concluding with the general injunction to write down anything that might later be turned to profit by the Company. The formal legal and Latin phrases and the subterfuge over the price to be paid indicate the Company officials' appreciation of legal literacies, how the law of contract applied in Holland, and how the hazardous activities of its ships were linked to a wider enterprise of competitive European accumulation practices where advantage was to be secured through fine attention to detail. Literacy operates here as an important instrument of regulation and control that extends the interests of the Company into the day-by-day activities of its agents. This control is necessarily tenuous, however, where it is applied at the very limits of the network of practices that give it effect. In contrast to the exactness of these instructions, in illustration of this last point, the attempts at their execution were very much messier: Van der Stel's despatch went on to inform the Chamber of XVII that *De Noord* was itself wrecked on the coast within a few hours after leaving the bay De la Goa. Prior to the sinking, the ship's captain Gerbrantzer had carried out his instructions “to the letter”, but reported that he had lost the “deed of sale” recording the purchase of the Bay of Natal, in the sinking of *De Noord*. He is reported to have made his way back by land to Cape Town, with eighteen of his men of whom only four survived the 200 mile journey, “the rest dying of hunger, thirst or heat, except for two or three who were killed by the Hottentots” (Maxwell, 1706, quoted in Bird, 1883, 59). Gerbrantzer told John Maxwell years later that he had purchased the place ('Terra de Natal') on behalf of the Dutch East India Company for 20, 000 florins (Maxwell, 1715, quoted in Bird, 1883, 60,

also in Chase, 1843, 12). This figure repeated the lie in his “written instructions” as Van der Stel described them (paragraph 4 above), that he should record the sale as “nineteen or twenty thousand gulden”.³ Gerbrantzer is reported by Maxwell to have returned again to Natal in 1705, to find the “late king's son then reigning”, to whom Gerbrantzer spoke of the agreement with the new leader's father.

“My father,” answered he, “is dead; his skins (i.e., his clothes) are buried with him in the floor of his house, which is burned over him; and that place is fenced in over which none may now pass; and as to what he agreed to, it was for himself: I have nothing to say to it”.

So Gerbrantzer urged it no further, having no orders concerning it from the company (Maxwell, 1715, quoted in Bird, 1883, 60, as well as in Chase, 1843, 12).

The colonial historian Mackeurton's (1930) description of these encounters is drawn from the same sources (Bird and Chase) so does not differ substantially, though his comments are revealing. As regards the purchase of the bay, he says the document “expressed the consideration as twenty thousand guilders, but the actual value of the goods handed to the delighted chieftain, Inyangesa, was less than a thousand. In a few days stone beacons of the Dutch East India Company, bearing the V.O.C. monogram, ringed the harbour”, and he goes on: “The deception practiced upon the simple Inyangesa [referring to the low price paid] would have meant nothing to him had he discovered it. He was incapable of grasping the conception of either the ownership of land or its alienation in perpetuity” (Mackeurton, 1930, 66).

Maxwell's, Bird's, Chase's and Mackeurton's accounts of the events all fail to mention that the Dutch captain could not have made sense of the direct speech of the chief or, later, his son at all, let alone report it *verbatim*. Gerbrander would have relied on Khoi interpreters whom he had with him, who spoke both Xhosa and Dutch, well or less well, as well as their own language. Whatever the young chief might have said would have been interpreted and refracted through local (Xhosa) language and culture, Khoi sensibilities, Dutch language and cultural values, and reinterpreted in English by Maxwell and the others. This fact of extensive translation across language and cultural practices is a feature and a problem with much of the data on early colonial and colonial-era cross-cultural encounters around literacy.

³ Apparently, in the translation from Dutch to English, the currency simply got changed in name (*gulden* to *florins*) and not number.

As I discuss in chapter five where I consider, in the context of literacy and Christianity, the phenomenon of translation and the extent to which literacy and Western religion were subject to substantial reinterpretation and adaptation by local people has not always been noticed in discussions of 19th century literacy in South Africa, particularly as regards discussions of the legacy of the missionaries (for example, in De Kock, 1996). Given these limitations on the reliability of the reported data I discuss the meanings of these events below, from the perspective of my thesis here about the value of a social practices approach to literacy.

Literacy events and practices

Taking a broad view, the events around the failed purchase of the Bay of Natal provide details of one example of the application of what could be called the appropriating discourses of colonialism in the early days of European world expansion. The ways of representing Africa and elsewhere stressed the wildness of the visited scene and its inhabitants, and involved a taming and claiming of what was regarded as a socially vacant space, through naming it, measuring it, surveying it, putting monogrammed beacons on it. Explorers' and traders' ships were often stocked with goods and bargaining chips, "gold, silver, pelts, fish, stones, swords, anything that could be bought and sold at a profit" (Latour, 1987, 216). What often followed were acts of appropriation, by way of 'land purchase', as an alternative strategy to direct conquest.

What I think is noteworthy, in the events described above, where Gerbrantzner and the Company failed in their first effort to acquire the Bay of Natal, was the Europeans' incapacity at that early moment to have their way as regards land acquisition, and for the logic of the son of the chief to hold sway over the Europeans, who were not yet in a position to assert their logic by force. As regards the written document of land purchase, it had no leverage over local knowledge, because such leverage does not lie, miraculously, in the technology itself, but has to be entirely dependent on situated social practices to give it force. In Mackeurton's view, quoted earlier, it was the simple-mindedness of the local ruler and his son, their conceptual incapacities, which prevented them from realizing, firstly, that the father had sold too cheaply, and secondly, that the son was bound by contract to forfeit the land. An alternative explanation for these dynamics would simply say that the Europeans' network was just not long enough, yet, to displace local knowledge and practice. The Europeans' assumptions that their practices were universally applicable did not count when they did not have the means to insist that that was the case.

However, it is also important for my thesis here to go beyond that point about the relativity of cultural knowledge and social practices, to examine how reading and writing are also resources that can assist larger strategies of power, domination and accumulation. Not just embedded in social practices as signs of status, power and identity, reading and writing were deployed as critical technological resources which the Europeans used to collect, organize and standardize knowledge about the geography, resources and peoples along the African coast, and to regulate their exploratory and trading enterprises, including that of slavery, as is well known (Anderson, 1983). Specific, situated practices of reading and writing, to do with collecting, recording and categorizing, as well as those of land ownership records were important resources for the expansionary mercantile capitalism that was followed later by outright conquest and colonization. To illustrate this point, I draw on Latour's parallel description of a comparable event.

Latour (1993) examined the records of a captain of a French ship, the *L'Astrolabe*, which was exploring the East Pacific, in 1787, when European maps of the region were still being developed. He gave an account of these events, which I summarize: Wanting to know whether the area of land known as Sakhalin was an island or part of the mainland, the captain consulted some Chinese men on the beach, who drew him a map on the sand, and then another in the captain's notebook. The French, because of bad weather were unable to double-check their informants' claims themselves, and "one entry in the notebooks indicated that the question of the Sakhalin was settled and what the probable bearing of the strait was" (Latour, 1993, 216). The charting of the bay was one part of a prodigious information-gathering exercise. Lapérouse and his team learnt as much about the place and the people as they could, gathering natural specimens, taking notes. Latour asks why the European sailors/explorers were all so hard-pressed to "take precise notes, to obtain and double-check vocabularies from their informants, to stay awake late at night writing down everything they have heard and seen, labelling their specimens, checking for the thousandth time the running of their astronomical clocks" (1993, 217). He says that the answer is that the people who sent them away were not so much interested in their coming back as they were in the possibility of sending *other* fleets *later*. ...

On 17 July 1787, Lapérouse is *weaker* than his informants; he does not know the shape of the land, does not know where to go; he is at the mercy of his guides. Ten years later, ... the English ship *Neptune* on landing again at the same bay will be much stronger than the natives since they will have on board maps, descriptions, log books, nautical instructions - they will be entering the bay for the second time - the first time

was when reading in London Lapérouse's notebooks and considering the maps engraved from the bearings De Lesseps brought back to Versailles (Latour, 1993, 217).

Although there is at the beginning not much difference between the abilities of the French and the Chinese navigators, the difference will grow if Lapérouse is part of a network through which the ethnogeography of the Pacific is accumulated in Europe. An asymmetry will slowly begin to take shape between the 'local' Chinese and the 'moving' geographer. The Chinese will remain savage (to the European) and as strong as the *Neptuna* crew, if Lapérouse's notebooks do not reach Versailles. If they do, the *Neptuna* will be better able to *domesticate* the Chinese since everything of their land, culture, language and resources will be known on board the English ship before anybody says a word. Relative degrees of savagery and domestication are obtained by many little tools that make the wilderness knowable in advance, predictable (Latour, 1993, 218).

The instructions given to the captain of *De Noord* by the Company official, as presented above, are consistent with Latour's analysis, down to the rather messy execution of those instructions in each case. The multiple tasks given to the officers of the Dutch ship were mostly concerned with furthering the advance of the Company and its capacity to profit from its dealings in new regions. The primary concern of the Company as reflected in those instructions was not the safety of its men and ships but was rather the safety of the information that they had gathered, as was the case in Latour's example. The Dutch East India Company was clearly concerned in the case of the *Noord's* voyage, with the kinds of knowledge and advantages that could be brought back by the ships, that it sent out on hazardous voyages along the south east coast, as well as what advantage they might secure on their voyages by way of land acquisition. Besides rescuing the survivors of an earlier expedition, who would bring detailed knowledge of local conditions and which would be transcribed at length, the instructions were precise and consistent: purchase the bay, transcribe it on a map for future use, take note of everything which may in any way be profitable or is worthy of remark, and make detailed records in a log-book.

The literacy practices that were central to these practices, in both the Chinese and the African examples, were ideological in Street's (1984) sense because they were technologies of knowledge and power that were situated exactly at the intersection of two networks of knowledge and social relations (the Europeans and the African/Chinese inhabitants). But, besides being ideological in that sense, these particular uses of literacy can be seen as resources and instruments for the expression and development of power and accumulation of knowledge and wealth in the Europeans' careful resorting to recording and description. The

sometimes clumsy practices (as exemplified in the reliance on Chinese surrogates to plot the Sakhalin strait, and in the successive sinking of Dutch East India ships in the case I examine), of archiving data and developing maps, accompany other technologies and resources, which make later changes possible, on a scale that has profound consequences. These literacy practices have had a complicated role to play in the processes that led to different kinds of material human practices, asserted on a global scale.

It is important to note that reading and writing were part of these appropriating strategies because they were part of situated practices that had a history of making particular uses of literacy. The widespread interest in acquiring land deeds for pieces of foreign territories is a very interesting example of how literacy practices come to be normalized over time in particular contexts, *black-boxed* in Latour's phrase (1993), or *compacted* in Freebody's (2001). I go on to examine the wider framing of this approach to land and literacy and then examine its application in the instances I study here. Over the next two chapters the issue of land and documents of transfer and ownership reappear frequently, over the time-span of several hundred years. I show in particular how the Bay of Natal is the intermittent focus of such land documents from the 17th through to the 19th centuries, where the cross-cultural misunderstandings are repeated as to how these practices come to have effect in settings that are different to those where the practices originated.

An historical perspective on land deeds and reading

In colonial times Europeans took with them such assemblages of power and knowledge as the alienability of land, and related social constructions of space and time when they travelled. They also took them as given universals, as self-evident technical resources, 'blackboxed' in Latour's (1993) terminology. Benedict Anderson (1983, 174) puts a slightly different spin on it, but makes a related point: "arriving from a civilization in which the legal inheritance and the legal transferability of geographic space had long been established, the Europeans frequently attempted to legitimize the spread of their power by quasi-legal methods."

Such practices relating to land ownership and transferability were black boxed because the history that had produced them had been erased from memory and the practice treated as standard or normalized. The disputes that had earlier produced these practices were forgotten and they had become a resource, tool and self-evident method of procedure.

Clanchy's (1993) historical study *From Memory to Written Record* uncovers some of these forgotten disputes in relation to the practice of recording land ownership through written documents in the context of medieval England. Clanchy detailed the struggle that was waged

by state and private property interests for the acceptance of written documents (of land ownership) in lay, as opposed to religious contexts, from the eleventh through the thirteenth century in England. The struggle over land in medieval England (from 1066 through to 1307) was linked to the growth of a capitalized, commercialized market and of rural production for market exchange, from the twelfth through to the fourteenth centuries and spreading over the next two or three centuries in England. A result was the expansion of private property, both as an idea and on the ground, and of contests over land and its ownership and usufruct rights. Established practice, where land ownership was confirmed by the testimony of 'twelve good men and true', was contested by educated property owners who could use reading and writing for their own and their families' advantage, and they won the battle to use written records for recording land ownership. These changes took place in a context where reading and writing were the preserve of only a small cohort, and there was no question at the time as to whether or not people who did not read or write remained capable of rational action, of acquiring and digesting information, and of making well-founded political and religious decisions. Street's (1984, 111-121) discussion of Clanchy makes the point that the development of normalized and standardized social practice in relation to written records reflected more directly the interests of some groups and individuals over others. The contingent development of particular practices, knowledge, institutions and subjectivities were peculiar, at first, to European history and politics and occurred in contexts of social struggle. Over time those social struggles have receded from memory and the practices of recording property ownership in written, legal documents has become entrenched and taken for granted in Europe, and then globally. Contemporary practice can thus be seen from this perspective as the product of a number of disputes and resistances, whose history disappears in the face of the routinization and standardization of those practices. As one illuminative example, Clanchy's (1993) study shows that the practice of dating (writing in of the date) in property documents and business letters, so apparently self-evident and neutral, was an outcome of conflict and gradual change, with clerics first objecting to the secular use of an essentially non-secular time frame, in a way that was seen as sacrilegious and threatened the power of the church. In Latour's (1993) terms, closing the black box on these disputes allows social actors to take the work of others as a resource and to move on. The strength of the socio-historically constructed network of people, materials and technologies lies in such social actors utilizing these resources, and being shaped in turn as regards their dispositions by the practices and material technologies they are using, which carry their history, unseen and forgotten. Reading and writing, like other resources embedded in particular practices, carry their histories into new networks of practice and have particular effects that involve the extension and modification of those networks of

practice. If we study literacy without regard for its history, then it remains a black box, an unanalyzed instrumentality in those contexts.

Clanchy's (1993) study also makes clear that illiteracy was not an issue in the historical period in the English setting he examines, because reading and writing were particular, changing activities in that medieval setting. Reading, as Clanchy (1993) points out, was not a solitary activity; rather, reading aloud to others was a specialist activity, the more demanding because many of the typographical details we take for granted today, such as blank spaces to separate words in a text, did not exist, or appeared inconsistently. Political and religious leaders had documents read to them by their clerks, who also did their writing for them. Clearly, the written/oral distinction was thus not a clear one, and certainly did not necessarily reflect the power differentials it so commonly does today. As Howe (1992, 60) has pointed out, in his study of the cultural construction of reading in Anglo-Saxon England, the origin of the word 'read' is the Germanic/Old English words *raed* and *readen* which meant advice, or to give advice (very much the meaning of the word *raad* in modern Afrikaans). Indeed the word shares cognate roots with a number of Germanic cognate languages, and carries the meanings "to give advice or counsel" or "to exercise control over something" (Howe, 1992, 61). Howe argues that the semantic development of the modern word "read" includes a group of words that designate various forms of speech: "Welsh *adrawd* "to tell or narrate" and *amrawdd* "conversation, discourse"; Gothic *rodjan* "to speak"; Old High German *ratan* "to consult or confer with"; Old Norse *roda* "to speak" (Howe, 1992, 62).

Howe argues that this last set of words make explicit what was implicit in the other cognates listed above: that giving of counsel was understood as a spoken act, that assumed an audience. He goes on to show that silent reading by a solitary reader was considered to be a strange and very uncommon pursuit, as reading was almost invariably a collective act, a public, spoken act. He quotes Stock's study of medieval literacy as involving a "textual community": "What was essential for a textual community, whether large or small, was simply a text, an interpreter and a public. The text did not have to be written; oral record, memory, and reperformance sufficed. Nor did the public have to be fully lettered" (Howe, 1992, 59).

In an analysis that reinforces Howe's argument, Fabian (1992) has suggested that reading acquired "its modern, almost exclusively ocular conception not too long ago", undergoing a "loss of sensuousness" that accompanied "the immobilization of the body, the end of reading aloud, solitary reading, reading as consumption"; and, he added, this disembodiment of reading "is all the more pervasive because it precedes encounters with other cultures" (Fabian, 1992, 83).

Such studies point to the historical variability in uses and understandings of literacy. They thus lead us to conclude that detailed historical analysis does not support the claim that writing is simply a technological advance for such purposes as recording property rights. Literacy in its particular uses is itself a socially shaped and specific social and technological practice that has arisen in the course of human activity in the world. Its forms and functions in particular cases have to be explained in the context of larger social processes. By examining the nexuses of literacy practices and material relations (human relations with the material world) with regard to such things as land, we also recognize the complexity of social fields. Such a conceptual orientation allows us to make sense of the incommensurabilities in understanding that groups of people with different histories and habitus bring to particular literacy events.

In the case of literacy practices in the context of European expansion into Africa in the 19th century, the shifts in meanings and uses that are given to literacy by a variety of actors at particular historical moments are occasions for research and study that help us to see the historical roots of situated understandings and valuations of reading and writing, including our own contemporary understandings. Like print literacy, other literacy practices, such as the development of maps of the world, the collection of natural and cultural specimens, the charting of harbours, were not the products of a process of disinterested scientific enquiry. They were developed, shaped, refined, and applied to give advantage to those who used them.

In this light, literacy is not an essentialized object for analysis. Literacy is rather an occasion for analysis, where that analysis is concerned with elaborating the values and meanings that are attached to what we take literacy to mean in particular contexts. That Europeans brought to Africa particular situated practices with regard to literacy can be usefully studied, initially, in border encounters, which show up features and contradictions more clearly than in settled times and contexts. Regardless of what literacy had come to mean within specific European networks of power, influence and activity, those meanings and practices were not reproduced exactly in new settings under different social conditions. I now examine examples of these processes in relation to border encounters, firstly between early traders and indigenous people, and later between missionaries and indigenous people, at the same Bay of Natal.

Literacy, knowledge and advantage along the southeastern coast of Africa

As I have already started to describe with regard to the *Stavenisse* and the Dutch East India Company, in the 15th and 16th centuries Europeans, firstly Portuguese then increasingly also French, Dutch and English, had sailed past the Bay of Natal (so-named by Vasco Da Gama as

he sailed past it on Christmas day) on their way from the Cape of Good Hope to Delagoa Bay and the East. Over time, from the reports of shipwreck survivors who had been picked up by passing ships or made their way by land to Delagoa Bay or the Cape, they had heard that the land was fertile, and inhabited by natives who were mostly friendly and had an abundance of cattle, milk and corn. Moving forward in historical time, I examine records of early European settlement at the Bay of Natal in the early 19th century, before colonial conquest of the region, but long after the Cape region had been occupied by the Europeans.

Natal was at first considered to be of little economic value by the British colonial government at the Cape in the early 1800s, preoccupied as it was with stabilizing its eastern frontiers (Davenport, 1977; Hamilton, 1998). There was a concern that the colonial power not be drawn into unproductive exchanges with the local people of the southern continent's southeastern region. Thus the first European settlers in Natal in the early 1820s were a small, disparate and often contentious group of men with their Khoi servants, who arrived at the Bay of Natal (later to become Durban) and led a precarious but profitable existence there, without the backing of imperial Britain and without the support of the colonial government at the Cape. Davenport (1977, 85) described them as a "small settlement of Englishmen" that "established itself at Port Natal in 1824, and by virtue of achieving a working relationship with Shaka it was just able to survive". Dependant on the personal patronage and protection of the Zulu leader, they traded for ivory and buffalo hides. A Zulu historical perspective on these settlers, in the James Stuart archives, is that "The first Europeans who came to Natal were persons in debt or in poor or questionable circumstances at the Cape. They came to Natal, hunted etc., and became prosperous" (Dinya ka Zokozwayo, in Stuart, 1976, 1, 95). Hamilton (1998, 175) described them as a rough band of adventurers and fortune-seekers. The 'pious missionary' Kay (1833, 401) a contemporary of these men, described the Bay inhabitants with telling disapproval:

And incredible as it may appear, there are now in Caffraria, Englishmen whose daily garb differs little from the beast-hide covering their neighbours; whose proper colour can scarcely be identified for the filth that covers them; and whose domestic circles like those of the native chieftains themselves, embrace from eight to ten black wives or concubines.

Zulu history sources confirmed that "they all had a number of wives and ordinary native kraals, but also differently constructed houses not far off, where they actually lived and at which they received European visitors" (Stuart 1976, 1, 111).

Charles Maclean (1992, 64), a young shipwreck survivor later wrote of the extent to which these Europeans had become changed by local living, and the 'culture-shock' he experienced when first encountering his colleagues on his arrival:

Long habits of association with the natives and seclusion from civilized society, even from that of each other, as their trading journeys to the interior kept us long and often separated, had stamped their manners with a degree of uncouthness that was obvious to us on our first landing at Natal.

Maclean adapted to local conditions and spent three years living in Shaka's kraal:

Indeed I feel no shame in confessing that I had become so heathenish, as this pious missionary [he is referring to Kay, quoted above, whose book he read some time after leaving Natal, but before writing his own memoirs] would say, that I had absolutely forgotten some words of my mother tongue. A Caffre word for an English one would drop in my conversation when meeting my shipmates after these long seclusions from their society (Maclean, 1992, 65).

As members, as they saw it, of a superior civilization, but living in a dependent and tributary relationship with local rulers, these early settlers occupied an interstitial position, neither 'here' nor 'there' (Thomas, 1994). A critical reading of their narratives shows in writing the ambivalence of their situation, their efforts to articulate the larger narrative of empire slipping as they on occasion got drawn more deeply into localized perceptions, attitudes, language and commitments. (For example, as dependants on Shaka's goodwill and protection they were required to engage in military expeditions against neighbouring groups, using their guns against Shaka's enemies.) Discussions and perspectives on literacy (theirs) and illiteracy (the Zulu people's) featured in their accounts in various ways, and details of literacy practices were sometimes described incidentally when they were concentrating on something else. I focus selectively below on literacy events recorded in their accounts and discuss the wider dynamics that help us to make sense of these events from the perspective of the social practices orientation to literacy that I am applying and examining in this thesis.

The various diaries, books, reports and journals of these first settlers have come to be important historical sources for histories of the region during the reigns of Shaka, son of Senzangakhona, and after him his brother Dingane, prior to colonial conquest of the kingdom. In particular the accounts of Nathaniel Isaacs (1883) and the diary of Henry Francis Fynn (later published in 1950) were drawn on by colonial historians, such as those of Bird (1883), Chase (1843), Mackeurton (1930), Macmillan (1936) as well as in Ritter's best-selling popular history entitled *Shaka Zulu* (1955). Isaacs's and Fynn's accounts contributed to the

metaphorical constructions of Shaka as 'the savage Napoleon' that were reproduced in novels and entered popular culture in many dramatic ways, including in the novels of Rider Haggard, John Buchan and others, as summarized in Hamilton (1998). (See also Street, 1975.) These sources have informed a modern 'Shaka industry', including a TV series and a tourist-oriented theme park in KwaZulu Natal called *Shaka World* (Hamilton, 1998). However, as Hamilton points out, these traders, isolated from British protection, were clients of Shaka and in their earlier accounts spoke glowingly of his reasonableness in earlier communication with British authorities, as they were concerned to open trade routes with the Cape. After Shaka's death, when they did not enjoy the patronage of his successor Dingane to the same extent, they produced their accounts for publication, which emphasized the savagery of the local rulers and the need for British intervention (Hamilton, 1998, 36-53). Besides those accounts of the early traders mentioned above, the memoirs of Charles Maclean are of interest, though not as clear on historical detail as he wrote his account many years later (re-published a century-and-a-half later in Maclean, 1992). He was fourteen years old when he arrived at the Bay, with James King, Nathaniel Isaacs (seventeen years old at the time) and others, on a ship that sunk on their arrival. He spent three years of his stay living at Shaka's court, under Shaka's direct protection. In addition, the accounts of missionaries, who followed the trader-settlers a few years later, provide further local detail and descriptions (Owen 1826; Gardener, 1836), including accounts of the arrival of Boer settlers in 1838, and the killing of the Boer leader Piet Retief and his followers by Shaka's successor, Dingane, which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

It is noteworthy that the Europeans' accounts of Shaka and the Zulu people invariably describe them as living in a cocooned pre-historical context, similar to other conceptions of non-western people which emphasize a 'great divide' between westerners and others (Goody and Watt, 1969; Ong, 1982). Henry Fynn who arrived at the Bay shortly before Isaacs and was part of the original group of European traders and settlers at the Bay of Natal, wrote in his diary: "Having been the first European who travelled through it (Natal) I had the advantage of obtaining information from the natives unmingled with any notions that they might have formed from an intercourse with the white man" (Fynn, 1950, 195; also quoted in Bird, 1883, 105).

I examine particular literacy events presented in these settler traders' accounts, drawing primarily on Isaacs's account because it is richest in detail, together with Zulu historical accounts (Stuart, 1976) which provide something of an alternative, indigenous perspective, and have been used as such by some historians (Hamilton, 1998) despite being collected by

Stuart, a late 19th century white magistrate in Natal. I use these sources to develop an analysis of the literacy dynamics involved.

Literacy encounters: Shaka draws first

Isaacs gave a dramatic account of his first face-to-face encounter with the fearsome King Shaka, where literacy features in rather surprising ways. As a classic encounter, if he is to be believed, between the archetypal barbarian king and the European adventurer there are remarkable disjunctures, not least through the form that the playful indignities took, to which Isaacs was subjected, at the massed assembly: After briefly acknowledging him, Isaacs (1836, 58) describes how Shaka “desired me to go away and not understanding him I was led about like a child. My interpreter pulled me about from one place to another like a man confused and apprehensive”.

Within a few hours of this first encounter Isaacs had an unanticipated encounter with Shaka over literacy:

the king sent for me again and presented me with a piece of paper, on which he had made some marks; these I was directed to decipher, but not being competent to do so, and my interpreter not being a very profound translator, we made but a sorry figure, and Shaka turning to his people, said, He does not understand the *ungnorty* or the letter, and they replied, *Yubo Barlu* or Yes, father, we see it (Isaacs, 1836, 59).

Moments later, Shaka sent for a “Portuguese” man, to show him to Isaacs, causing the latter to be “most agreeably surprised to see a European in this wild and unfrequented place”.

As Isaacs tells it (1836, 59), Shaka then also “asked the Portuguese to read his [Shaka's] writing who, as may be expected, was as incapable of expounding his hieroglyphics as myself. After amusing himself for some time at our expense he directed us to retire to the hut.” Back at the hut, the (“Portuguese”) man told Isaacs he was there “for the purposes of purchasing cattle” (Isaacs, 1836, 59).

Both Shaka's show of writing, as Isaacs described it, and the presence of the Portuguese trader disrupt the trope of 'savage isolation' that Isaacs as well as Fynn presented as constituting the Zulu context they found themselves in. The narrative trope that stabilizes their accounts is that of savages who live in exotic isolation and are the negative 'other' of Europeans in every possible way. Literacy, or rather its lack, is presented as a key instance of that negative otherness. However, in the details of particular events they continually undermined this trope of the savage wilderness. In Isaacs's description above, Shaka referred to the *ungnorty*, suggesting that there was already even a term signifying 'written document' in the Zulu

language. In fact, the contemporary spelling in Zulu of that word would be *unoti*, indicating more clearly that it is a direct borrowing from English of the word *note*, a borrowing that had apparently already happened before colonial conquest and before a sustained English presence in south-east Africa. The alternative explanation is that Isaacs was lying about this encounter. However, it can be argued that, through informants living in the colonial-ruled Eastern Cape and through refugees from the British-ruled Cape, the Zulu leader would have had access to such information about reading and writing, as well access to the terminology as it developed in the cognate isiXhosa language of the Cape. The “interpreter” whom Isaacs referred to and who led him around so roughly is a further discordant element that disrupts Isaacs’s binary account of culture and barbarism that have previously not met. This ‘interpreter’, it turns out, was one of Shaka’s key informants, with sustained knowledge of Europeans, gained from living in the Cape and having experienced life as a prisoner on Robben Island. Described also in Fynn’s diary as a native of the Cape frontier who had been a prisoner in a war between the colonists and “Kafirs” and sent to Robben Island, he had earlier been taken as an interpreter during a survey of the Eastern coast, and then to St Lucia with Lieut. Farewell, he had “run away and sought protection with Chaka, who gave him the name of Hlambamanzi, denoting one who had crossed the water. Among the colonists he had been known by the name of Jacob Sotobi. He spoke good Dutch” (Bird, 1883, 76) and “a little English” (Maclean, 1992, 72).

He was also called John Jacob and was the witness to Shaka’s signature in the Algoa Bay document that I examine below. He resurfaced after Shaka’s murder by his half-brother Dingane, who became king, as an adviser to Dingane.

There is no doubt that this man was a source of information for Shaka. For example, Fynn claimed that Shaka expressed his

aversion to our modes of punishing for some crimes by imprisonment which he said must be the most horrid pain that men could endure. If he were guilty, why not punish the deed with death. This argument had arisen from the circumstances of his interpreter having been taken prisoner and sent to Robben Island (quoted in Bird, 1883, 81).

This man can be described as an early example of those cultural mediators⁴ who can code-switch, have cross-cultural knowledge as well as local credibility that gives them critical leverage in cross-cultural contexts such as the literacy-linked events that I am examining here.

⁴ The SoUL research described the complex role of literacy mediators in mediating the literacy- or discourse-specific aspects of collective social practices in contemporary contexts (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996, 27-29; Malan, 1996, 106-109; China and Robins, 1996, 162-166) and also the role of informal apprenticeship learning (guided

Such complexities as I have described undermine the stabilizing trope in accounts such as Isaacs's. Isaacs frequently used literacy in his account as an indicator of civilization, so that even his praises of Shaka mark his lack of literacy as a descriptive category to accompany the term 'savage'. As such he was drawing on a genre of Western representations of Africa, and the non-Western world more generally, where a binary frame, or 'great divides' (Said, 1993; Street, 1983) divide the west from the rest:

[Shaka's] enquiries as to the use and quality of everything manifested a shrewdness which we little expected to find in an unlettered savage. Anything in the shape of an implement of war always irretrievably caught his attention, and he would attend to any explanatory description with the most intense anxiety (Isaacs, 1836, 92).

Such settler's accounts are of interest in that, as I have already suggested, they repeat assumptions in relation to European 'civilization' and indigenous 'barbarism'/ savagery, while the settlers were living in such close cultural intimacy with the local people, and under conditions of political dependency on an African state. As a result of this proximity and dependency, as I show, their detailed accounts of events often rupture the binary frames of their meta-narrative of civilization/barbarism, in telling ways. The settlers' practical understandings destabilize those broad narratives. Literacy and its uses feature in these accounts, which include details about networks of trade, communication and passage. Indeed, historians have suggested that the Zulu dominance at this time in relation to other local groups was at least partly a result of their controlling the trade routes, of ivory, hides and perhaps slaves as well, between the Cape, Natal and Portuguese East Africa (Davenport, 1977; Hamilton, 1998, 1992; Cobbing, 1991). The 'Portuguese man' that Isaacs found at Shaka's court on his first visit there is just one example. Isaacs's narrative showed Shaka participating in literacy events, including the routine passing on of mail to the settlers, sent down by hand from the Portuguese harbour to the north, as in the following example: "The king sent for us, and gave us a letter addressed to Mr Farewell. It had been sent from Delagoa Bay by Captain Colledge of the brig Salisbury" (Isaacs, 1834, 90).

Such details provide supportive evidence of the Zulus' own trade links running all the way to De la Goa Bay, and probably beyond, and undermine the alternative picture of savage isolation that Isaacs and others invoke in their accounts. In another example, the fifteen-year old Charles Maclean travelled on foot to De La Goa bay to collect medicine, protected by

participation and participatory appropriation) as the key methods of informal acquisition of literacy and discourse-linked capabilities.

Zulu escorts dispatched by Shaka, as they travelled safely through the lands of neighbouring people (Maclean, 1854, 167). Finally, in rejection of the imagined idea of pristine, pre-civilized isolation which Isaacs and others suggest, Zulu history, as recorded by James Stuart, has it that Shaka had a network of informants, trusted men who lived 'under deep cover' with other groups of people, as far away as the Eastern Cape, who kept him informed, amongst other things, of British expansion and military activities (Stuart, 1976, 1, 192-194).

Literacy, land ownership and emissaries

Isaacs gave an account of a mission a few years after his arrival at the Bay in which, as Shaka's clients or tributaries, he accompanied his boss, James King, and some Zulu men including a senior chief, to establish communications between the Zulu kingdom and the British colony to the south. I treat this as another literacy event which I use to illustrate my argument thus far and to extend my analysis. In confirmation that this event happened, the Zulu chief Sothobe is celebrated in Zulu history for having made this boat trip to the Eastern Cape (Laband, 1995, Stuart Archives, 1976). These emissaries from Shaka carried a signed letter from Shaka, drafted by Lieut. King, to King George of England. Isaacs's account expressed outrage that the English authorities at Algoa Bay gave a hostile reception to the delegation and would not allow them to proceed to the Cape. His anger with the British officials for their unwelcoming and dismissive reception of the deputation is revealing in its suggestion of Isaacs's ambivalent situation:

What could have called for such an attempt to confound two or three unlettered people on an especial mission from their king, and cajole them to count the amity of the Commander of a British Colony, I know not nor can I divine. To what did these interrogations tend? To elicit the object of the mission alone, or to frighten the ignorant and untutored chiefs into a confession of some ulterior design? (Isaacs, 1834, 217)

It is clear from the historical detail (summarized, for example, in Hamilton, 1998 and Laband, 1995) that a primary purpose, from their own perspective, of the traders making the trip to Algoa Bay as emissaries of Shaka Zulu was to open up trade routes to the Cape and to solicit imperial protection for their trade. But as clients and dependents of the Zulu kingdom, they had no independent voice in these dealings and suffered the same rebuff as the Zulu emissaries whom they accompanied. Isaacs's emphasis on the delegates' illiteracy is linked to his account of the questions they were asked by the port authorities:

Isaacs recorded the interrogation by a Major Cloete:

Q. - Can Chaka write, or make any characters whereby to show that he sent the chiefs on their mission, and to show his authority?

Answered by Sothobe - No he cannot write or make characters.

Q - How is Sothobe to be known as a chief and how is he distinguished as such?

A - By the bunch of red feathers; and there is no one allowed to wear them but the king, and two or three of his principal chiefs.

Q - Have you no sign, or token, or feather, or tiger's tail, or tooth, to show that you were sent by Chaka?

A - We generally send cattle but the vessel could not take them, Chaka has sent an ivory tusk (Isaacs, 1834, 218).

This exchange suggests that the production of ambassadorial letters was expected as a matter of procedure by the British, who then looked for local substitutes (“feather, or tiger's tail, or tooth”) for this ritualized European practice. Sothobe's reference to the “red feathers” as a mark of a principal chief carried no weight in this exchange because these signs that were so powerful in the context of the Zulu kingdom were not recognized at all within the networks of classifications and standards of the colonial authorities at Algoa Bay, or alternatively were seen as proof of the savagery of the locals. In contradiction to the claim in the dialogue above that the emissaries had no written authorization from Shaka, Lieut. King produced a document written by him and signed by Shaka, he insisted, written in a curious amalgam of legal formality mixed with local detail. However, the document's validity was tenuous outside the local setting, given that Shaka's illiteracy had been confirmed in the dialogue above. It was also undermined by the sub-text, in that document, of King's effort to establish his legal right to the Bay of Natal in the eyes of the British. The grant of that land to him by Shaka takes up a large part of the document, as is shown below:

Mission to His Britannic Majesty

At Chaka's principal residence, Umbololi.

February 1828

I, Chaka, King of the Zulus, do in presence of my principal chiefs now assembled, hereby appoint and direct my friend, James Saunders King, to take under his charge and protection Sotobi, one of my principal chiefs, whom I now create of the “tugusa” kraal, Kat, my body-servant, Jacob, my interpreter, and suite. I desire him to convey them to H.M. King George's dominions, to represent that I send them on a friendly mission to King George; and after offering him assurances of my friendship and esteem, to negotiate with His Britannic Majesty on my behalf, with my chief Sotobi, a treaty of friendly alliance between the two nations, having given the said J.S. King and Sotobi full instructions and invested them with full power to act for me in every way as

circumstances may seem to them most beneficent and expedient. I require my friend King to pay every attention to the comforts of my people entrusted to his care, and solemnly enjoin him to return with them in safety to me, and to report to me faithfully such accounts as they may receive from King George.

I hereby grant him, my said friend, J. S. King, in consideration of the confidence I repose in him, of various services he has already rendered me, presents he has made, and above all the obligations I am under to him for his attention to my mother in her last illness, as well as having saved the lives of several of my principle people, the free and full possession of my country near the sea-coast and Port Natal, from Natal head to the Stinkein River including the extensive grazing flats and forests, with the islands in the Natal harbour, and the Matabana nations, together with the free and exclusive trade of all my dominions; I hereby confirm all my former grants to him.

[Shaka's Scrawl]

John Jacob

his mark

Witness the above scrawl having been made by King Chaka, as his signature.

N. J. Isaacs

(Isaacs, 1836, 216)

Isaacs wrote that in drafting the document Shaka had refused “to make a simple mark and instead scribbled all over the document, saying that as he was a great king he must make a great show” (Isaacs, 1836, 216).

That Shaka did not intend to grant land in the European way is demonstrated by the fact of the other grants of the same piece of land that he had made formerly to King's partner-in-trade, Lieutenant Farewell. Later in that same year, 1828, Isaacs was the recipient of “a grant” from Shaka “making him chief of Natal” (Isaacs, 1836, 255) and giving him twenty-five miles of coast (from the river “Umlutee” to the river “Umlaas”) and a hundred miles of hinterland. It included the territory already granted to Farewell, and included that granted to King earlier in the same year. Again Isaacs said that Shaka scribbled all over the document:

After he made his mark, as his signature to the grant, the interpreter [Jacob] made his, which happening to be larger than that of the king, the latter asked, in a stern manner, how it was possible that a common man's name could be greater than a king's. Insisting on having the pen and grant again, he scribbled and made marks all over the blank part and said “there,” pointing to his signature, “anyone can see that is a king's name, because it is a great one. King George will also see that this is King Chaka's name (Isaacs, 1836 255-6).

Such embellished descriptions of events, it must be pointed out, only exist in forms recorded by writers of European origin, and there is more than one reason for not trusting their accounts of these events. Traders such as Isaacs and Fynn wrote their books and published their diaries for specific purposes tied to their trading interests: they were writing into a European market that demanded exotic accounts of savage 'others', as European interest in tales of adventure and conquest was high (Street, 1975; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991). The traders, as Hamilton has (1998) argued, had vested interests informing their constructions of Shaka and the Zulus. However, many of the details of the described events are consistent with each other, and are also reported in Zulu historical accounts, suggesting a broad accuracy, though their interpretations of these events and encounters are source for debate.⁵

What is literacy then?

I have described the contingent detail that surrounds the occasional literacy events that surface in the accounts of Europeans living in the Bay under Shaka's patronage so as to give a fuller picture of the social conditions and practices against which these uses and understandings of literacy occur. We can now ask more closely detailed questions about literacy against this background. Isaacs's odd first literacy-linked encounter with Shaka, as he described it, raises the question: What is literacy under these circumstances? What kinds of reversals are in play here, when the European is ridiculed by the African as an illiterate? Isaacs, whose account we are reading, represented Shaka as the illiterate savage African king but Shaka, in turn, is described as setting up Isaacs as the illiterate buffoon for the entertainment of his court. There are two answers to the question as to what literacy is that I want to draw attention to for the purposes of my argument here. They are conflicting answers to the question and both have validity.

The first answer to the 'What is literacy?' question is that given by Lemke (1997,1) who wrote that we cannot define literacy from a semiotic perspective more precisely than "as a set of cultural competences for making socially recognizable meanings by the use of particular material technologies". A semiotic perspective on literacy, following Lemke, is that the term *literacy* is not a useful one, precisely because it does not explain what is particular about one

⁵ One example of such debate is that Hamilton and Cobbing disagree as to whether these men, and the Zulu kingdom generally, routinely participated in slave trading (Hamilton 1998, Cobbing, 1991, Laband 1995, Davenport 1977)

form of sign-based, meaning-making activity compared to another. By such a definition, Lemke (1997) says, literacy (print literacy) is not much different from competence at cooking or choosing a wardrobe. All that differs are, firstly, the particular semiotic resources used to make meaning (enscribed language, as opposed to the cuisine or fashion systems) and, secondly, the particular material artefacts which mediate those processes (written signs in contrast with food and clothes). In these terms Isaacs was an object of entertainment at the gathering precisely because he could not read in that setting. He could not interpret *any* of the signs and sign systems, not just the signs of the Zulu language, but also the signs of greeting, deference, social position, wealth, and so on, that were inscribed in the cultural organization of space, movement, language, gestures and on bodies and things in that environment. The multiple, elaborate codes and signs that characterized the Zulu court and homestead were indecipherable by Isaacs at that time, though he would learn more about them over time. Nor could he make sense of Shaka's writing, because there was no established and mutually grasped system of meaning-making there that could be deciphered. In one sense, therefore, and in the sense that counted for Isaacs, Shaka could not read or write either, in that he could not transcribe systematic meaning by way of marks made on paper.

But Lemke's point, helpful as it is, does not explain why Shaka was able to ridicule Isaacs and claim literate status for himself. The joke against Isaacs worked precisely because print literacy held a particular status as compared to all those other semiotic modalities. That status had been claimed for print literacy by the Europeans who presented it, and used it, as a defining form of meaning making, a social technology whose uses within particular kinds of social practices, distinguished western from other societies who, they said, either did not have it at all, or had it in restricted form (Goody, 1977; Havelock, 1976). Literacy thus also operated as a sign or as a compacted category of inclusion and exclusion within larger discourses that detail various divides, between insider and outsiders, civilization (western) and barbarism (other societies), christian and heathen, and between literate and illiterate.

Because print literacy is a social activity that has a historical dimension linked to relationships of social inequality and uses of power, and because it was (and is) represented as such in ideological and evolutionist European discourses about stages of civilization, literacy as a social construct also indexes (functions as a sign which points to something else with which it is linked in some way) unequal social relations between people and groups of people. It is this indexical function of literacy that Shaka was apparently challenging, by pointing out that, in his domain, it was his power that would decide what held status and what did not. This is also what literacy is, in answer to the question that I asked at the start of this analysis. As much as

it is a sign-based meaning-making activity in the sense that Lemke describes, literacy is also a sign and part of a sign-system that simultaneously indexes inequalities in stratified social contexts. In this way it functions similarly to language in contexts of difference, as Hymes (1980) and other socio-linguists have argued: In stratified societies, and across societies in unequal relations with each other, *differences* in the use of language or literacy systematically translate into *inequalities* (Blommaert, 2002, 3-4; Hymes, 1980). As Hymes (1980), Bourdieu (1990) and Bernstein (1996) point out, much of social inequality is expressed in terms of individuals' and groups' inability to perform certain discourse functions with the resources they have. Literacy is presented, in the last two centuries at least, as the highest form of language use, and therefore the definitive and final marker of such inequalities. This is the sense in which literacy is ideological in Street's sense and it is contested, both in its meaning and in its practices (Street, 1984, 2003).

In the Algoa Bay exchange between 'Major Cloete' and Shaka's emissaries, as recounted above, Isaacs carried a written document signed by Shaka, but this document was rejected by the British officials. The interesting point about signatures, as Harris (1995) has argued, is that they are undoubtedly literacy, but do not usually or necessarily have to be decoded or readable, letter-by-letter. Harris discussed signatures as one example to illustrate his argument that literacy is not simply 'words written down'. Legibility, or language written down is not the criterion for a successful signature; rather its individuality and its emblematic nature are the criteria. Harris' general point makes the case that "the signs of writing function in a way that is basically different from the signs of speech, even where the purpose of the written text is to record a spoken message" (Harris, 1995, 7). Meaning is not contained and coded simply into the graphic marks which can be coded one by one to produce meaning. Rather meaning is coded into the genre of writing, the materials used, the various other representational resources that have particular social meaning, and the wider social context that shapes textual production, in addition to and together with the individual coded letters.

In his discussion of *maktab* literacy that I reviewed in chapter one, Street pointed out that the concept of signature as indicating agreement to a transaction rests upon an institutional framework that specifies particular relations of a commercial or legal sort, or in this case of a political sort (Street, 1984, 174). In this light, it is not surprising that Cloete at Algoa Bay would not accept Shaka's signature, because Shaka was undoubtedly not part of the institutional arrangements where such practices had currency (although the Dutch East India Company was happy to overlook such niceties nearly two hundred years earlier when they attempted to purchase the Bay of Natal by way of a deed of sale, signed by a local leader).

Cloete established that Shaka could not read and write, and then asked questions about alternative signs. There were none that were acceptable. On the other hand, back in the land occupied by Shaka and his people, Shaka's elaborate signature made the point that in that setting the rules had not yet been set as to how such practices should work. Shaka had no tradition or higher authority to offer him criteria for framing this practice so he asserted his own, on the basis that power was his.

We can see from the above events and in their discussion here, examples of how much of the sources and histories of the micro-technologies of literacy are generally hidden from us even as we make use of them. There is nothing inherent in the particular system of making marks on a surface which says that individuals can acquire or dispose of land; that two parties can enter into an agreement which can be enforced by providing proof that there was indeed an agreement; that making marks in a consistent way, which might or might not follow alphabetic practices of name recording, can be read by others as a binding commitment by an individual or representative of a group of people, to a course of action. Embedded, unseen and forgotten, in every-day conceptions of what literacy is and how it works are the labour, conflicts and compromises that long ago produced classifications and standards which people take for granted in social practices, both in everyday activities and in institutional contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this chapter the following points can be made:

The frequency with which early literacy events fall into two distinct categories in the sources I examined is notable. Firstly, the repeated attempts to record land acquisition in documents has been discussed at length. Secondly, the attempts to represent local people as existing in a state of pre-cultural savagery which can be seen clearly through the lens of their illiteracy, is a repeated theme. It is clear that the early traders and explorers in Natal attempted to stabilize their accounts of literacy events in ways that were consistent with their own understandings, intentions and purposes. But because of the relative tenuousness of the networks of practice, meanings and materials that they brought to a setting where other forms of authority and meaning predominated, their accounts showed inconsistencies and contradictions, often effectively deconstructing themselves. Isaacs's account of his early humiliation over his illiteracy on the part of the illiterate barbarian king undermines the broader narrative of the barbarian king living in pristine savagery that he otherwise constructed. His indignation over the refusal of the British authorities at Algoa Bay to accept the *bona fides* of his deputation demonstrates the ambivalence of his location, temporarily between two worlds of power, authority and symbolic systems, between two almost incommensurable and disjunctive

networks. His incidental accounts of the flows of documents and people along the south-east African coast undermine his and others' insistence of the wildness, isolation and pre-cultural nature of the setting. While mostly emphasizing the savagery of their patron, the settler-traders' all remarked on the ceremonial richness of court life, including mass parades of colour-coordinated cattle, formal courtesies and generous gifts, dance, ritual, song and poetry that characterized many social interactions.

Settler-trader accounts of native people's early encounters with literacy drew predictably on accounts of 'native awe' but were biased and unstable accounts of such literacy events. In the following chapter I go on to draw on wider and diverse sources to examine this question of first encounters with literacy more closely. I move on to examine, in particular, first and early encounters between Christian missionaries and local people, and missionary accounts of how variously situated indigenous people in southern Africa made sense of the reading and writing that was shown to them and taught to them. I examine the wider social frameworks, networks of practices and beliefs that shaped these dynamics. I am concerned to further examine and extend the conceptual and analytical resources of the social practices perspective on literacy, which is the focus of my larger study.

Further application of the social practices approach to literacy in South Africa

(i) The historical study of literacy as situated social practice:

Chapter Five: Native awe. Refracted literacy practices in early colonial contexts

My broad perspective in this thesis, consistent with a social practices approach to literacy is that literacy practices are variable social practices which link people, linguistic resources, media objects, and strategies for meaning-making in contextualized ways. My concern is therefore to apply this epistemological and methodological orientation to literacy across a range of social, developmental, educational and historical contexts in South Africa. My purposes for doing so are twofold. Firstly, I want to establish the productiveness of such an orientation to literacy in South Africa by showing how its application to particular sites of study produces a detailed, convincing and useful account of the forms and functions of literacy in that setting. Secondly, I am concerned to use such case studies for purposes of developing the resources of this orientation to the study of literacy in South Africa. Each study provides an opportunity for reflecting back on the explanatory resources of the model, and for extending and sharpening these. The end point of my thesis is thus reached when I have shown how the application of a social practices orientation to literacy has answered particular questions that are central to each case study, and secondly, when I have shown how the reflexive work of reconsidering each case study has contributed to an extending and sharpening of the resources of a social practices approach to the study of literacy in South Africa.

In chapter four I considered historical examples of literacy-linked interactions in South Africa under particular historical conditions. They included conditions where located understandings of literacy were applied in circumstances where the social practices that sustained such located understandings were not securely in place. I was consequently able to explain how the way situated practices and procedures which are conventionally taken to be universally applicable can be shown to be contingent upon wider social practices that have an institutional, interactional and material history that has been shaped by ideological considerations. I argued there that print literacy was an important part of the processes of accumulating strategies of knowledge and power, along with other social technologies, embedded in relations and practices of domination and material accumulation. Because

technical processes are also social processes, the development of such resources happens within a variety of situated, embedded contexts, networks, artefacts, relationships, assumptions and practices. In my present study these practices and commitments, as regards print literacy, were products of European contexts, and they came to have varied, limited, and unanticipated effects in an African context, including the emergence of hybrid practices which merged elements, practices and technologies in surprising ways. I use the term *hybrid*, following Bhabha (1995) to refer to the kinds of social practices and identities that emerge in cross-cultural contexts, under conditions of domination and exploitation, that realign cultural differences and incommensurability in novel ways. For Bhabha the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity displaces the histories that constitute it.

In this chapter I again draw on and extend the methodological resources of the social practices model to examine early examples of cross-cultural literacy encounters. I move in this chapter from literacy events in broadly pre-colonial contexts of Euro-African contact, to those in early colonial contexts. I study how these practices and their relevance to the African context were understood by European subjects, particularly missionary educators, and how they were understood, received and taken up by various African subjects, both leaders and other people. I first review one contemporary study (De Kock, 1996)¹ that presents an analysis of the consequences of literacy with which I disagree. I then draw on detailed studies of particular examples of how local people have taken hold of literacy, in support of the alternative perspective that I introduced at the beginning of chapter four. I draw further on socio-linguistic and social semiotic arguments in relation to the data that I interpret, to further extend the theoretical perspective on literacy studies that I develop in this thesis.

Literacy, Christendom and conquest

Leon De Kock's *Civilizing Barbarians* (1996) study is notable in that it gave a pivotal role to literacy in the dynamics of 19th century southern Africa, and saw these dynamics, and literacy's role in them, as impacting directly on the present. "Literacy was at the core of colonization in South Africa" De Kock claimed, "...it was implicit in the frontier struggle between sharply contrasting modes of information and comprehension... The linguistic/semantic/semiotic transformation implicated in literacy teaching was... at the centre of the broader colonization of South Africa" (De Kock, 1996, 64-65).

¹ I wrote an extended critique of De Kock (1996) in Prinsloo (1999a).

De Kock argued, as part of his main thesis, that the roots of apartheid are found in the inherent racism and cultural aggression of the 'civilizing mission' of Protestant missionaries in South Africa in the 19th century, and particularly in the actions and writings of missionary educators and leaders. His argument was that white colonial domination in South Africa was won by 'blood and ink'- colonial subjugation was both coercive and discursive. His own attention was on the discursive, the embedding of a Victorian English in the colonial context as the language of civilization and progress, and on missionary-driven efforts to “*inscribe* in 'barbarous' Africans the precepts of a largely Protestant, Western modernity” (1996, 2). De Kock saw the missionaries' students as “having recently emerged from an oral culture”. He stressed the perception-altering impact of “the book” and cited the work of Goody (1977) in support of his case. From the perspective that I take in this study, such an argument is an example of the kind of ‘great divide’ thinking that I examined critically in chapter one where I discussed Street’s (1984) critique of the work of Goody (1977, 1969), Ong (1982) and Havelock (1976). As I explained there, great divide thinking around literacy presents literacy as a social technology which operates as a uniform and decontextualized determinant. Such an understanding of literacy is an ideological one because it unavoidably reinvokes the rhetoric of a 'great divide' between modernity and tradition. It does this by associating literacy with an idealized version of western culture and essay-text literacy. It takes as a given the assumption that the acquisition and use of skills of reading and writing brings about cognitive, perceptive and personality changes that are in some way uniform, dramatic and irreversible (Ong, 1982). The result, though this was clearly not De Kock’s intention, is an elision of the hybrid character of historical and contemporary identities in Africa, and a repetition of the binary frameworks which De Kock critically identified as characterizing missionary writing. The very dichotomy of civilized/savage that De Kock criticized in missionary texts thus surfaces in a new guise in his assumptions about divides between written and oral cultures, that are seen to differ simply in being products of literacy operating (or not) as a transformative social technology.

De Kock focused on the literary form of missionary writings, to identify their reliance on the civilized/savage binaries when they talked about what was needed in Africa. He read off processes of identity formation from such representational forms, those of published, public, missionary discourse, as if the values and epistemology he identified in the missionary writings were absorbed piecemeal, without any mediating or transforming processes.

Implicitly, De Kock (1996) presented reading as constituting a passive reception of signs. As a result, and despite his concern with processes of identity construction, De Kock's analytical focus on the binarisms at work in the 'civilizing discourse' does not constitute an explanation of the complexities related to receptions of the cultural and ideological messages of the missionary educators. An alternative understanding of reading as situated social practice argues, rather, that at the point of reception, already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic habits, or "ways of knowing" (Heath, 1983) that are already in place and take on distinctive dimensions. This is the point where, in anthropology, Comaroff and Comaroff (1992), for example, went further than De Kock (1996), to understand the situated nature of reading. They pointed out that other social practices, artefacts, and symbolic systems besides formal texts have semiotic structure - they are mediums and carry meaning just as language and literacy do. They referred to the

welter of domestic detail and small-scale civilities [and to] the mundane and routine elements of everyday encounters and exchanges.. [in] the constitution of complex social fields, that build hegemonies, that work thorough-going social transformations behind the back of a declarative, heroic history. [And, they add,] Money and commodities, literacy and Christendom challenged local symbols, threatening to convert them into a universal currency. But precisely because the cross, the book, and the coin were such saturated signs, they were variously and ingeniously redeployed to bear a host of new meanings as non-Western peoples... fashioned their own visions of modernity'(Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992:5).

My discussion in chapter four of the multiple semiotics of the Zulu royal homestead of King Shaka that Isaacs was unable to read on his first visit started to make the point that I am elaborating here. I draw on the New Literacy Studies, on social semiotic theory and socio-linguistic analysis to take this analytical work further.

Reading as internal sign-making and as socially shaped

Comaroff and Comaroff (1992) point to the variety in meaning that can be taken from such signs as the cross, the book and the coin in the quotation above. Such diversity of meanings that might be taken from such signs is an example of the variability that is at the heart of sign-based communication of all kinds. As semioticians and socio-linguists have explained, the taking and making of meaning from literacy as well as from spoken language and other communication modalities is not the result of a straightforward act of decoding of meaning that is simply already present. As Kress (1997, 58) has explained it, reading is a transformative action, in which readers makes sense of the signs provided to them by the

writer within a frame of reference of their own experience, and guided by their interest at the point of reading. In this vein, Lemke (1999, 4) claims that reading and writing are meaning-making processes of the same kind. "They are in no sense 'inverse' to one another. All that's different are the situational affordances: the other human or inanimate players we interact with to make our meanings -- be they writing partners or marks scratched on paper". Kress described reading in very similar ways as to how one might expect him to describe writing, as the "transformative action of internal sign-making", in which, in the case of reading, the action is shaped by the sign that is read, but is not determined by it. This transformative action includes processes of abstraction and condensation, and is partly under the control of the readers, guided by their interest (Kress, 1997, 58). A critical point about these processes of reading and writing that social semioticians agree to is that they are fundamentally social processes, part of organized social intercourse. As Bourdieu (1991, 39) expressed it, "The all purpose word in the dictionary, a product of the neutralization of the practical relations in which it functions, has no social existence: in practice it is always immersed in situations."

The meaning of a sign lies not exclusively in its relationship to other signs within a sign system (e.g., a language system) but rather in the social context of its use: Discourse has no intrinsic function which is a product of a sign system independent of its social dimensions (Blommaert, 2002). It is granted a function by others in a process which Bakhtin (1981) described as 'dialogical'. Such an emphasis on the social in contemporary semiotic theory involves a reversal of classical semiotics where Saussure (as described in Bourdieu, 1991) asserted the priority of *langue* over *parole*, so that the meaning of a sign lay in its relationship to other signs within the language system. In contrast, "the social dimensions of semiotic systems are so intrinsic to their nature and function that the systems cannot be studied in isolation" (Hodge & Kress 1988, 1). Harris (1995, 2000) also rejects Saussure's model of signs as surrogates for that which they represent, and proposes instead a model where communication is envisaged as the contextualized integration of human activities by means of signs (Harris, 1995, 4). For Harris (1995, 13) "the sign is what is produced by such social action and is also its enabling mechanism". Such work in social semiotics and linguistics encourages one to look beyond the idea of social discourse as direct and unmediated, in disagreement with De Kock, for example, where he claimed that "the vehicle of the 'Victorian world mission' was an English which bore terrible certainties and was seldom tolerant of alterity. It was a language of closure and myopia..." (1996,30).

The theories about communicative practices as social practices which I draw on and develop here hold, in contrast, that situated groups of people do not passively receive 'literacy' (i.e., Western literacy forms and situated text practices) and its consequences, but rather 'take hold of it' (Kulick and Stroud, 1993) in ways that are dialogic with existing social values and communicative resources. In some cases this might involve developing literacy practices that extend and elaborate on an already available communicative resources and repertoire, in unanticipated ways, rather than their replacement. That dynamic was what Besnier (1993) found amongst the Nikulaelae people living on a South Pacific atoll and Kulick and Stroud (1993) found in a remote part of Guinea Bissau. In both those cases local appropriations of literacy practices at least partly modified the received resources to fit with established ways of being and knowing that preceded encounters with western literacy forms. Even under conditions of domination and imperialism, there is invariably an appropriation that takes account of local values and interests (Gaitskell, 1994, 111).

Bakhtinian-influenced socio-linguistics draws attention to the ways in which acts of communication are constituted in acts of both similarity and difference. This point is taken up in the work of Pratt (1991), Rampton (1995, 1998) and Blommaert (2002). Pratt (1991) argued that the idea of an homogenous speech community is an inappropriate concept for dealing with difference in heterogeneous social contexts. She proposed instead a *linguistics of contact*, where communication happens in sites of differences, or in contact zones. Pratt identified contact zones as sites of social communication where audiences are plural and not well known to each other, and where reliance on shared systems of understanding cannot be taken for granted.

I draw on these arguments in my discussion below of literacy and contact in early colonial contexts. I examine examples of early literacy-related encounters between local people and European, particularly missionaries. I start with examinations of accounts of so-called 'first encounters' of Africans with the print literacy brought by Europeans.

Literacy and 'native awe'

Missionary and other 19th century literature on indigenous 'first responses' to literacy has commonly framed such reports in terms of 'native awe', where such descriptions have stressed the 'pre-logical', the superstitious, the ritualistic and the totemic dimensions of individual responses of non-westerners to the demonstration of literacy and its effects. I examine some examples and subject them to analysis, drawing on the resources I have developed here.

First, I give an example of a typical account of a literacy-linked colonial cross-cultural encounter. The following description of 'native awe' is from Natal, only thirty years after the first settlers whom I discussed in the previous chapter, arrived at Port Natal. The Rev. Mason, of Sydney Sussex College, Cambridge, undertook a mission tour in Natal, from which he produced two books, *Life with the Zulus of Natal South Africa* (1855) and *Zululand: A Mission Tour in South Africa* (1854). Here he describes how he and his wife, short of money, but safe in their snug cottage at dusk, kindled a log fire on the hearth and gave

our Caffre a double allowance of maize for his supper, drew our chairs and table to the fire, and commenced writing letters for the English mail, which would leave by the first of the next month.

Our Caffre sat at the opposite fireside, wrapped up in a cotton blanket, parching his corn in a frying-pan, and chuckling as he watched our pens busily employed running over the paper; but when we had finished them, and began to read them over, out aloud, he was mightily astonished at the art of writing, and putting his forefinger to his lips, exclaimed, "Wo-marmee! Wo-marmee!" ("Oh, dear me! - oh, dear me!")

Having made up our letters, I showed it to our sable friend, telling him, in broken Caffre, that our father and mother lived far away, and that an Englishman would carry the letter over the water to them if we gave him a shilling for his trouble. This struck the Caffre as very good; but on showing him the empty purse, he saw at once that we had no shilling for its carriage, and manifested considerable concern. Taking the letter he examined it closely, then weighed it in his hand, repeated (as he thought) the direction - having heard us read it - replaced it on the table, and with a wistful look said, "Upi-marley?" (Where is the money?) a question we were unable to answer (Mason, 1855, 187).

The language used in the portrayal of the Zulu man, in the descriptions of him as "chuckling", "astonished" and "wistful" appear to represent the quality of his thought, as one of "the children of the wilderness" in Mason's phrase (1854, 24). In constructing this portrait on the basis of their actual experiences, Mason draws on the familiar 19th century narrative genre of civilized Europeans encountering people of lesser civilizations. But if we go beyond the colonial overtones portraying him as a child and a buffoon, we can say that the African man responded with alert sympathy for the missionaries' dilemma, and a full appreciation of the details of postal payments. Mason's suggestion that the man was encountering literacy for the first time must be a distortion, similar in kind to Fynn's claim to be the first European to

travel through the Zulu kingdom. The man is clearly attached to a mission station, in service to the missionaries, a Christian convert, familiar with money and with Europeans' pidgin-Zulu. Mason's construction of "Wo-marmee" as a Zulu phrase meaning "Oh dear me" is a further 'writer's license' that relies on his readers having no Zulu language fluency. The phrase is not a Zulu language phrase at all in fact, but is closest to English, if anything ('Oh Mommy!'). The man's attention could be said to be focused on making a fuss about the cleverness of Mason and his wife, and not on the literacy act itself. That would support the view that the man has a protective relationship to these English 'fish out of water', who are reliant on him, despite their descriptions of him as childlike. That he is their minder (and their servant) is apparent in Mason's recount of the conclusion of this literacy event where he tells how the man then went and cut down some thatching grass and sold it to raise the shilling for postage (Mason, 1855, 187). Not a 'child of the wilderness', the man appears to have been at home in the syncretic practices that characterized life on mission stations, including financial and trading practices, wage labour and social relations with visiting English missionaries.

What this example draws our attention to as regards literacy is the emphasis in such European writing on 'native awe' in the presence of the 'magic' of literacy, and the apparent relish in describing so-called 'first encounters' with literacy, as if such encounters would make very clear both the wonder of literacy as a representative form of western technology, as well as the child-like natures of other peoples. Indeed, showing off the 'magic' of writing in first encounters appears as a common trick of both traders and missionaries in their 19th century writings. Traders would usually include a display of shooting as well, along with displaying the effects of gunpowder, and of mirrors and telescopes (as in Henry Fynn's, 1950, descriptions in his diary of his shooting and horse-riding displays for Shaka, and Isaacs' descriptions of Shaka's interest in telescopes and mirrors, Isaacs, 1836). A related example is to be found in Harries' (2001) study of literacy events recorded by Swiss missionaries in the eastern Transvaal or Mpumalanga region. Harries describes how Arthur Grandjean, a Swiss missionary in Mozambique, would send a local Thonga-speaking person at his mission station to his (Grandjean's) home with a written message, 'the paper that speaks', instructing his wife to supply the bearer with a desired object. "Their astonishment will be complete when ...they will see my wife take a hook and give it to the messenger, just as I promised him." (Original source quoted in Harries, 2001, 419)

There are also descriptions in 19th century traders' and missionaries' texts where local leaders turn the literacy 'trick' into a game of their own, having enjoyed the spectacle when the missionaries did it. In chapter four I presented Isaacs's descriptions of Shaka's purported

playfulness with regard to literacy, where Shaka wrote on a paper and asked Isaacs and then a Portuguese trader, to read it, in the presence of the Zulu court and army. This event is echoed in a missionary's account a few years later where Shaka's successor Dingane is seen to turn a demonstration of literacy by the sailor turned missionary, Capt. Gardiner into an entertaining contest for the women of his court. Gardiner (1836, 42) wrote that they would not believe that he could do the things that were written down, unless he were present when the directions were noted. He describes how he was placed outside the fence while his "interpreter, at their dictation, wrote in pencil the names of twelve of fourteen of the women" (1836, 43) and some details about where they sat. Gardiner was brought back in, given the paper, and pointed to each individual named on the paper, which produced "great merriment and surprise" (1836,43). Then objects were hidden and he was given written instructions as to their location: a broom, a mat, a bead "in the closed hands of one of the ladies", finally an ear ornament concealed "in the skirt of Dingarn's (sic) cloak", although he describes Dingane as having 'cheated' by concealing it under his foot instead. Gardiner concludes his description of this event by saying that "Dingarn, it appears, had on some former occasion, proved the skills of a white man in deciphering his own language" (1836, 43).

A further example from Lesotho is described by Sienaert (1994) from the writings of French Protestant missionary Eugène Casalis who went to Lesotho in 1829 and claimed to have gained the friendship of King Mohoshoe. In the following extract Casalis (1959) describes how the King's aged father was shown how 'words become visible'. One of the best readers amongst Casalis's local pupils was made to withdraw while Mohoshoe told the old man to:

think of something and tell it to this white man; he will draw some marks on the sand and you will see. The marks being made, the village scholar was called, and very soon made public the thoughts of his Sovereign; the latter, more than stupefied, covered his mouth with his hand, and looked from one to another of those present, as if to assure himself that he had not been transported to an ideal world (Casalis, 1959:83 quoted in Sienaert, 1994, 78).

These brief accounts of literacy events, where literacy as a technology is displayed in the form of magic tricks and entertainment, are what I want to examine here. Associations between literacy and magic were made frequently during early colonial encounters. European accounts of Africans and literacy present descriptions of 'first encounters' which stress 'native awe' in the presence of the seemingly magical properties associated with the technological

resources of print-based literacy. These accounts provide a challenge to the conceptual resources I am using, to explain these linkages and associations. My starting point in making sense of such literacy events is to examine them in relation to one of the basic points applied by scholars using a social practices approach to literacy, namely, that the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being (Street, 2003). The challenge is to describe the dynamics of such 'first encounters' in a focused and explanatory way, such that convincingly plausible sense is made of particular literacy events, and so that such explanation contributes to a further elaboration of the theoretical perspective I am developing.

Literacy and magic

The question of literacy's association with magic is indeed an interesting one, since it points to the technological aspects of literacy. As Bowker and Star (1996, 1) argue, in a discussion of how classifications and standards work, "if we don't understand a given technology it looks like magic". They suggest that we are all familiar with versions of the banal assertion that "We do many things today that a few hundred years ago would have looked like magic". They suggest that even engineers black-box and think of technology 'as if by magic' in their everyday practical dealings with machines. They argue, following Latour, that the process whereby technology gets black-boxed involves an obscuring of or forgetting about the labour involved in its development and design, such that the technology and practice become a given. They are concerned to discuss all the 'missing work' that makes things look magical. They thus encourage their readers to examine cases that do not fit easily into the created world of standards and classifications, to seek insights into just what has been embedded and what it is we take as given. Their task of uncovering the practical politics underlying classifying and standardizing practices is an example of the activity in which we are here engaged. Street's (1993) edited collection of multiple studies of literacy in cross-cultural contexts provided important examples of contexts where reading and writing were shaped by different practices and traditions. Such studies of dramatically different applications and practices as regards reading and writing reveal just how many of the associations we make with reading and writing are themselves contingent practices, not outcomes of the technology independent of its social uses.

Elsewhere, Street (1995) has confronted similar missionary accounts of 'native awe' and responded to them. For example, Street (1995) reinterprets Clammer's (1976) interpretation of the phenomenon of 'native awe' in the presence of literacy in the context of Wesleyan

missionary work among the people of Raratonga on the Cook Islands. Clammer's account quotes directly from an 1837 missionary account and presents a version of a missionary 'trick' common in African contexts too, as I describe them here. The missionary in Clammer's (1976) account took a wooden chip and wrote on it with charcoal a request to his wife to send on his builders' square, which he had left at his house. He asked a man to take "the chip that speaks" to his wife. After some protest, the man did so and was amazed to see her produce the object without being asked. The man's excited reactions included running through the village and shouting his amazement at the English people who could "make chips talk". He tied the wooden chip around his neck with string and wore it for some time thereafter. Street notes that the missionary account relishes the display of 'native awe'. Street's response is to say that, "shorn of its colonial overtones" the passage could be taken as

evidence of the sense of intellectual discovery and excitement that the acquisition of literacy can provide and a demonstration that local peoples were quick to understand the potential of literacy despite the narrow ways in which it was being made known to them (Street, 1995, 14).

Street is here reacting to the condescension of the Europeans who describe the locals' excited responses to literacy as evidence of pre-modern, 'savage', superstition-ridden mindsets. We can make sense of this account, he says, without having to mystify literacy itself, or to make assumptions about native irrationality that were typical of 19th century European writings.

In my own analysis, however, I want to go further than Street went on this occasion and to ask what associations with local forms of magic or embedded technology might have been drawn on by the excited man. I again start from the assumption that the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being, and ask what kinds of situated responses produce the particular associations, made in this way, between literacy and magic. Without labelling it irrational, I suggest that there might well have been evidence of associations of literacy with magic in the local man's response, although Clammer's (1976) description does, indeed, not provide that evidence. However, there are examples of a similar kind from southern Africa where local people do draw associations with magic and ritual power.

Undoubtedly, missionaries themselves contributed to these associations by making connections between religion and literacy, by linking the bible, 'the book', to the will and the superior powers of their deity, by playing magic games like that of 'the chip that talks', and by

their insistence on the absolute superiority of Christianity and European cultural and technological practices. It is also clear, from the following examples, that such associations of literacy with religious and other forms of power were received by people who themselves drew on the perceptions of the powers of local technologies, if we take technology to mean the use of specialist (scientific) knowledge for practical, systematic purposes, including those of ritualistic and totemic power, attitudes to the spiritual world and its material powers, and the power of diviners and herbalists. This point can be illustrated by way of an example, involving Bishop Colenso, God and gunpowder in 19th century Zululand/Natal.

Wonderously taken: Religion, politics and literacy

The Anglican archbishop of Natal, Henry Colenso, an Oxford graduate, described how, when he finished explaining the nature of God to the Zulu chief Pakade, the chief asked him: "How do you make gunpowder?" (Colenso, 1855, 116-17). Chidester's (1996) discussion of this detail from Colenso's account makes the point that the distinction between religion and politics is not a clearly drawn, unshakeable one, free of time, space and context. Presumably the question was a political one, but the possibility that firearms might get the power to strike over a distance from a supernatural source, and were identified with the Christian mission, could easily have invested this question with a religious content. "Certainly Pakade assumed that it was a relevant question to raise in a discussion about God" (Chidester, 1996, 7).

Chidester's argument can be applied equally to literacy. That literacy was understood ambiguously, and in ways that drew links to local practices and beliefs, including witchcraft, should of course come as no surprise to those adopting a perspective that sees literacy as variably situated in social practice. If we can observe instances, as in the Colenso example, where the Christian God and gunpowder are regarded as, in some sense, comparable social technologies, then we can certainly understand why the magic of literacy, or its hidden work in Bowker and Star's (1996) sense, should be explained metaphorically by comparing it to a locally familiar social technological practice: diviners and herbalists too sometimes cause things to happen in surprising ways, have understandings and knowledge which are not generally available, and are thought to be in touch with worlds not readily available to other people. Literacy sometimes appears to have a comparable magic.

Harries's (2001) detailed ethno-graphic study of literacy and magic in south eastern Africa in the late 19th and early 20th provides an important contribution to this discussion. He presents detailed examples, drawn from a close study of Swiss missionary literature from north-eastern South Africa in particular, of associations of literacy with magic. I also examine other

examples drawn from missionary literature which support his argument and then go on to review the role of literacy in the critical dynamics between Dingane, the Zulu king following Shaka, and the Boer leader Piet Retief, leading up to Retief's death at the hand of the Zulus. I show that even though Dingane is described as associating literacy with magic in anecdotal examples, in his use of literacy in written communications for strategic and political ends he is shown to apply a practical understanding that is strategic and adept, to the extent that he used literacy in ways that took by surprise and confused his European opponents.

Swiss Mission records: Literacy and magic

Harries (2001) examines how the particular understandings of literacy brought by Swiss missionaries got transformed and were taken up very differently by local people. He shows that the massive importance attached to literacy and literacy instruction by the Swiss missionaries had direct roots in the complex experiences of Swiss protestants. He points to a Calvinist insistence on reading as a practice that encouraged religious devotion, suggesting that this norm contributed to the very high value placed on literacy amongst Swiss protestants. Struggles during the 19th century in Switzerland between the Established Church, the Free Churches, and Radical politicians, over the church's control over education also "produced an extraordinarily high level of literacy" (Harries, 2001, 407), so that Protestants came to see reading as a personal interpretive act, bringing them into direct personal contact with God, in contrast to Catholic reliance on priests to mediate the word of God.² The Swiss missionaries in southern Africa valued literacy as an effective means of spreading the gospel, but some of them also identified literacy as an important agent for cultural change. In particular, the missionary anthropologist, Henri-Alexandre Junod described at length how "immersing Africans in a written language structured by a disciplined grammar and a regular orthodoxy... would raise their charges to think in the manner that had led to the development of Europe" (Original quoted in Harries, 2001, 410).

Harries quotes Junod as writing that literacy would "give a fresh aspect to things in general. These twenty or thirty letters of which the Blacks had not the slightest notion, these signs, thanks to which wood and paper have been made to speak, will henceforth allow great minds

² Graff (1987) identified a very similar process in 18th and 19th century Sweden, where related Calvinist influences led to many more people reading and writing than was typical of Catholic European countries.

to transmit their thoughts direct to their fellow men” (Harries, 2001, 412). Junod compared African society to a “wild buffalo” with the “yoke” of literacy and education “placed on its neck”. “The savage mind of the Bantu”, he remarked confidently, “is now being trained to civilized methods, and the Elementary School gathers in the goatherds of the bush” (Harries, 2001:413).

However, as Harries (2001) goes on to point out, rather than challenging local beliefs and tipping local people willy-nilly into 'modern' or 'literate' mind-sets, literacy often served to reinforce local beliefs, including belief in witchcraft. I will briefly draw some examples from Harries’s discussion that are relevant for my present purposes.

The 'unseen' ideological values that characterize Western essayist literacy have been described as those of 'clarity, brevity and sincerity' by Scollon and Scollon (1995) in their discussion of the way literacy texts vary cross-culturally. These values were probably what Junod had in mind when he identified what the appropriate form of literacy should be. But, much as they tried, the missionaries could not control the productions of their converts. For example, the missionaries were dismayed by converts “who found in the bible confirmation of their belief in witchcraft, and of how to deal with witches” (Exodus XXII, 18: thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”) (Harries, 2001, 418). Readers also found confirmation in the bible that dreams were a vehicle of divine communication - local people looked to their dreams for advice, and reported frequent contact with God (Harries, 2001, 418). For many converts, who placed value in oratorical skills, 'reading' meant the memorization and recitation of long passages from the bible (Harries, 2001, 415), not unlike the many Swedish people in the 18th and early 19th centuries whom Graff (1987, 37) describes as having widely learnt from their village priests a form of literacy that sometimes enabled them to 'read' familiar extracts from the bible, and little else.

Harries (2001) also found that the villagers in Junod’s area of influence drew direct connections between literacy and the powers and dynamics of witchcraft, thus offering evidence that literacy was seen as imbued with ritual authority and totemic power. For example, an old woman described the characters on the page of a book as the equivalent of the bones thrown by a diviner. For this old woman, a spirit inhabiting the pages arranged the print in the same way as the ancestors arranged the diviner's bones. Just as a skilled diviner read the ancestor's messages from the bones, so too could a literate individual commune with God by deciphering the print He had scattered on a page (Harries, 2001, 420).

A related belief in the power locked within writing was remarked on by Henri Junod. When one of his neighbours prepared to embark on a journey, the missionary was requested to provide him with a written message. Junod was intrigued that the subject of the message was of no importance; its function lay merely in its utility as a sign of authority that would frighten his neighbour's debtors into repaying their loans (Harries, 2001, 419).

In a further example, an older man feared that words he had seen written in his presence would later change. "It will not stay in the form that it has been written down", he informed Arthur Grandjean, Swiss missionary: "When we transact business we say things in front of witnesses and the word remains" (Harries, 2001, 422). His remarks invert the usual association of the spoken word with impermanence and the written word with consistency.

As Harries summarizes this point:

No common, universal message was inherent in the words scratched or printed across a page; and reading was put to uses very different from those envisaged by the missionaries. Far from literacy domesticating the savage mind, in many cases it was appropriated, harnessed and yoked by indigenous people (Harries, 2001, 417).

Concerns about witchcraft and belief in the powers of diviners feature strongly in records of Zulu and Xhosa dynamics. I have already pointed to Dingane's interest in the power of literacy, in the entertainment of a literacy game with Capt. Gardiner and women of Dingane's household. Here I show how Dingane drew a link between literacy and divination: The Rev. Francis Owen was a missionary at Dingane's court in 1837, and wrote and read letters almost daily at times for Dingane, as I discuss in more detail below. Owen describes a "novel and singular scene" he recorded in his journal. An old man with a withered arm

and having his head ornamented with a number of small bladders came forward. Three of the king's servants sitting down began, with great animation, to snap their fingers at him, crying "Find it out!" - he himself repeating some words after them. I asked Dingaan who he was, *He replied: "It is like writing; he can tell things,"* (my emphases) (Owen, 1927, 49-50).

Days later, Owen asked if the man had told Dingane his secret. "He laughed and said, 'No; not this time. Nevertheless he was a great secret-teller. If anything was hid, he could tell where it was. If any person, also, had by witchcraft caused sickness, this man could smell the

witch out” (Owen, 1927, 57). In this case Dingane used the putative powers of literacy practice (“It is like writing”) as a symbol of prescience, to explain the diviner's art.

It is apparent then that local interest in the powers and dynamics of literacy practices as described above, drew on people's own located understandings and networks of meaning. These inferences as to the power of literacy practices drew on concepts that resonate with local understandings of the locuses of power.

The arguments of various subscribers of 'great divide' theories about the effects of literacy can be seen to be one version of literacy as magic. Junod's idea that “these twenty or thirty letters” with “a disciplined grammar” would result in Africans thinking like Europeans is a good example. The assumption behind such 'great divide' views of literacy is that broad and located practices and effects associated with literacy, as are developed over long periods of history in one context, will be transmitted, unseen, along with the acquisition of letter coding and decoding skills. It is as if the receivers of such wisdom are complete cultural dupes.

I have examined a number of accounts of the situated reception of alphabetic print literacy by diverse people in South Africa in early colonial times. I have thus provided evidence to show that the consequences of print literacy put forward in different ways by De Kock (1996) and by various European missionaries was mistaken. Literacy did not turn out to be a Trojan Horse that was received as a gift that then subtly but unidirectionally transformed the consciousnesses of local people, cognitively re-orientating them and changing them in predictable ways. Literacy did not lay the seeds of a particular version of modernity, in some linear sense, and in some kind of autonomous way, as some missionaries thought it would and some modern scholars argued that it did. Instead, I have shown that literacy as situated social practice was subject to varying and at least partial appropriation, redefinition and translation.

Semiotic distinctions

Following the semiological perspective of Harris (2000, 1995) we can distinguish between understandings of literacy, or theories of writing, in the examples above in three ways: between *theories of written communication*, *theories of the written sign*, and *theories of the writing system*. Theories of written communication are those that relate to the “biomechanical parameters” of writing (Harris, 1995, 27), involving key understandings of how writing works. For example, those people who ascribe magical powers to the artifacts of writing, who admire the “chip that talks”, or question that the marks will stay unchanged on the page, do

not share the understanding of writing that some of the others have, as consisting of marks that are made with communicative intent. In Harris' terms they do not have *a theory of written communication* that makes sense of writing as intentional, communicative sign-based social practice.

Many of the people in the other examples I have presented above, including those of the Zulu man in Mason's example, who cuts and sells thatching grass to raise money for postage, have a recognizable theory of written communication but they lack what Harris calls *a theory of the written sign* (1995, 27). They grasp what is involved, and participate in processes of reading and writing though they do not understand in detail how these processes accomplish what they do.

Harris's third distinction is that of theories of *writing systems*. Those eighteenth century European scholars who thought that the cuneiform inscriptions of Persepolis were decorative inscriptions rather than examples of writing worked, says Harris (1995, 27) with a limited theory of writing systems which prevented them from recognizing a particular set of marks as writing. In chapter four I described how Nathaniel Isaacs was constructed by Shaka as an 'illiterate' figure of entertainment because he could not interpret or take meaning from *any* of the signs and sign systems in what was for him a completely unfamiliar environment. The multiple, elaborate codes and signs that characterized the Zulu court and homesteads held no meaning for him. On the other hand he saw illiteracy as a key characteristic of King Shaka and the Zulu people. It is clear that we could agree with Isaacs and say that the Zulu people did not have a system of writing, in that they did not have a script or a system of enscribing and interpreting language, using marks. But that would mean we have a theory of writing systems which says that writing is only *glottic* writing, where the formation and interpretation of texts presupposes knowledge of a particular language (Harris, 1995, 95 and 13). Harris suggests, however, that we have to include non-glottic writing (which is writing that is not language-based) in our theory of writing systems or we would exclude musical notations and mathematical writing, and, we can add, we would exclude those forms of cultural encoding which include marks on bodies and clothing which indicate social station, as well as architectural and spatial designs. We would also exclude markings of social spaces that indicate divisions of status, gender, age and other social cleavages, rankings and divisions of labour. However, as I argued in chapter four, print literacy has come to be given such status that it has defined what writing is, rather than being seen as just one form of glottic writing,

that of alphabetic writing. We can also point out that glottic writing, and writing as a representational medium, are just one example of the forms and functions that writing takes and is given. This is the point that De Souza made in his studies of pictorial writing in the Amazon (De Souza, 2001, 2002) where he argued that the visual writing of a group of Amazonian Indians has a performative and interactional function, rather than a representational function, and is concerned with invoking and recalling hallucinatory, culturally specific and culturally important states of mind. As a kind of writing it has almost no points of connection with Western notions of writing. Examples of such visual writing are seriously misunderstood by some Brazilian educators, says De Souza (2001), who assume that such visual writing is merely of an illustrative or decorative nature. They make the same error that was made with regard to cuneiform (Harris, 1995, 27), failing to recognize that there is a *writing system* involved, even though its framework of communication has no parallel in western glottal and representational writing.

Early missionaries and traders as scribes for local leaders

From the above discussion, it is clear that an essentialized understanding of what literacy meant to local people is not an appropriate framework for understanding the forms, functions and understandings that located literacy practices held for them. Literacy did not have one stable meaning across these settings. It is also apparent that the Zulu leader Dingane, like Shaka before him, had a good appreciation of the potentials of writing as it was utilized by various Europeans, for purposes of communicating over space and time. Not knowing exactly how the written signs were made, Dingane clearly knew what written communication was about, and how to utilize it for his own ends. He made active and strategic use of writing to manage his relations with the settlers at the Bay of Natal and with the Boer trekkers who entered his domains and sought land to occupy, as I describe below. His situated use of writing undoubtedly took the Europeans by surprise, with dramatic results.

From a literacy studies perspective it is interesting to note just how much the dealings that I examine below were text-mediated events, despite assumptions that African people were living in a 'pre-textual' world which they could assumedly only cross after sustained education and immersion in western knowledge forms. In particular, the events leading up to the killing of the Boer leader Piet Retief and his followers, while visiting Dingane's homestead, a famous historical event, are set up in numerous ways through the complex uses of writing, on the part of Dingane, in particular, as well as by the Boers, with shifting roles being played by a missionary as literacy mediator and secretary to the Zulu king. The extent

to which these relations were text-mediated is seldom noted in the historical record. Smith points to a similar gap in contemporary sociology which she criticizes for taking little account of “the phenomenon of textually mediated communication, action and social relations.... Our lives are infused with a process of inscription, producing written or printed traces or working from them” (Smith 1990: 209, quoted in Barton, 2001, 100).

The journal of Francis Owen, a missionary at Dingane's court in 1837 and 1838, is a key historical source as the only European record of the important events around the death of Piet Retief. Owen's journal provides details of just how much Shaka's successor was engaged in writing practices, and also reveals some of the complex dynamics involved. Owen's descriptions of his unanticipated and unsought work as Dingane's literacy mediator or scribe provide details of how Dingane actively and enthusiastically made use of reading and writing in his dealings with various groups of Europeans. Owen's descriptions also reveal the complex power relationships that were in operation in relation to these textual practices. Owen was almost entirely subject to Dingane's political authority while at his homestead. Dingane would let him preach to children but hardly ever let him preach to adults, and laughed openly at some of Owen's religious ideas. However Dingane gained from Owen's presence under his patronage in a number of ways, not least of them because of his usefulness as a reader and a writer, and so he made several efforts to keep Owen content and in place. He sent for Owen very frequently, almost daily, to read or write letters. I rely on Owen's record (Owen, 1926). Owen does not anywhere in his diary consider whether his limited fluency in Zulu and his restricted understanding of local political and cultural dynamics might shape or limit his account.

Owen commented a number of times on Dingane's enthusiasm for writing. After dictating a letter, Dingane was, as Owen described it

desirous of putting his own mark on the letter [so] I gave him the pen wherewith, as if affecting to write, he made a scribble down the paper, at which I could not keep my countenance, nor did he preserve his. [One assumes here that Owen means that they both laughed.] He is indeed wonderously taken with this sure means of communication by writing and resorts to it at every opportunity. Whenever he sends a message to or by a white man it is always on paper. The other day having occasion to send a white man to Delagoa Bay, he made him write down the message that he might not forget it and sent to me for pen, ink and paper for that purpose (Owen, 1926, 59).

Within days of settling in to his house on the edge of the king's homestead. Owen was persuaded by Dingane to write a letter in his own name, asking for gunpowder.

I wrote a letter to Mr Maynard's agent at Port Natal to this effect, Sir, I beg to send you an elephant's tooth and shall be obliged by you sending me in return as much gunpowder as it is worth by bearer. I remain, etc. (Owen, 1926, 41).

The extent to which Dingane had an informed and controlling involvement in the writing practice is made clear by Owen describing that he read out the letter in draft to Dingane who made corrections: "Tell him the source of the tooth," and Owen then added a post script: "P.S. The tooth has been given me by Dingaan (sic)" (Owen, 1926, 41).

When the gunpowder did not arrive, and instead a letter arrived from the Bay of Natal to Owen questioning whether the original letter was not a forgery, Owen informed Dingane, who persuaded him to sit down and write another letter confirming the original order for gunpowder. This letter was sent off immediately with the messenger who had brought the letter from the Bay and the gunpowder duly arrived. Later on, Owen discovered that there was a ban imposed by the British authorities at Delagoa Bay on providing the Zulu king with gunpowder, and he was mortified that he had been so-used to circumvent the ban. He protested his ignorance of the ban at length in his diary and wrote that he subsequently refused Dingane the use of his bullet mould, in an effort to make up for his being so used by the Zulu king.

Dingane's letters to the Port of Natal settlers similarly reflected the shifting power relations between the settlers at the Bay of Natal and the Zulu leader. Dingane had earlier demanded of the missionary leader Captain Gardiner that he return refugees from the Zulu who had sought protections at the Bay. Dependant on the goodwill of the king but undoubtedly knowing that the refugees would be killed if returned, Gardiner had sent them back nonetheless, and secured his tenure for a while. Owen wrote a letter demanding the return of yet another group of refugees "Isiguabani and three or four other men who were mentioned by name" (86). Of interest is Owen's horror as well as his meek compliance with the request.

This morning Dingaan sent for me to write a letter to Capt. Gardiner... This letter was of a very serious and inauspicious nature ... I was grieved and shocked at the assertions which it contained, I felt it was best to write according to Dingaan's dictation (Owen, 1926, 85).

On this occasion the matter was resolved by a return letter two days later from Captain Gardiner, explaining that the fugitives had fled elsewhere (Owen, 1926, 71).³

Blood and ink

Dingane's dealings with the Boer leader Piet Retief are particularly interesting as regards the use of writing. His manipulative use of texts, on the one hand, and the great store put on written documents by the Boers, on the other, are remarkable. Retief had arrived at Port Natal with his followers on 19 October 1837 (Davenport, 1977, 58) and immediately wrote to Dingane asking him to cede Port Natal and the territory around it, the same land that had already been granted at least four times in writing to various European groups and interests, dating back to the document held by the captain of the Dutch East Indian vessel, *De Noord*, to Farewell, King and Isaacs, as I described in chapter four, and including a document held by Capt. Gardiner who was then resident at the Bay of Natal.

Dingane's communications with the Boers were strategic from the start, winning somewhat confused but admiring comments from Owen, in the extract below.

He [Dingane] then dictated a letter to the chief of the Boers who had written to him the other day. The purport of this letter does credit either to Dingaan's honesty or to his polity or to both. It was to say that these sheep which had been captured from Umzelekaz (in number 110) belonged to the Dutch, and that he was anxious to return them to their proper masters... I was much pleased with this little instance of Dingaan's sense of justice. As he was desirous of putting his own mark on the letter I gave him the pen wherewith, as if affecting to write, he made a scribble down the paper (Owen, 1926, 58-59)

Whereas Owen could not then decide whether the king was being honest or strategic in his wish to return stolen sheep, it turned out to be a strategic move. The Boers arrived at Shaka's homestead soon thereafter. A complicated sequence of writing and translating of letters followed, with the Dutch-speaking Boers putting great store on getting a land allocation document, written in English, signed by Dingane:

³ These events were a part of a rising tension between the Bay settlers and the Zulu kingdom, and Dingane had already stopped trade with the Bay settlers (Owen, 1926; Davenport, 1977).

November 8th – Dingarn sent very early for me, and in great haste to meet the Dutch on business. Mr Retief had written a letter to himself as from the king who had dictated it. This letter being in Dutch was first interpreted to me, and then read over to the king for his approval. I was requested both by the king and Mr. Retief to write the letter in English (Owen, 1926, 62, 3).

The Gouverneur [Retief] then returned home with me, here I wrote in English to the following effect. “An answer to your letter and the conversation which has now taken place [referring to Retief’s letter of 26 October] ... To go on now with the request you made for the land. I am quite willing to grant it... (Owen, 1926, 63).

Owen understood that Dingane was referring to the land surrounding Port Natal which Owen understood Dingane had “already given to the king of Great Britain by a formal grant, signed by him since Capt’n Gardiner’s late arrival”, but which he was, in Owen’s words now “quite willing” to give to another power (Owen, 1926,63). Owen was outraged by this apparently open duplicity on Dingane’s part. The letter that Dingane dictated included an elaborate demand that the Boers prove themselves before getting land):

.. I wish to explain that a great many cattle have been stolen from me from the outskirts of my country by people with *clothing, horses and guns*. These people told the Zoolus that they were Boers, and that one party was gone to Port Natal and that they (the Zoolus) would see now what would come upon them! It is my wish now that you should shew that you are not guilty of the charge which has been laid against you, as I now believe you to be. It is my request that you should retake my cattle and bring them to me, and if possible send me the thief, and *that* will take all suspicion away from me, and I will cause you to know that I am your friend. I will then grant your request (Owen, 1926, 63).

Owen, displaying some independence from Dingane, had a private conversation with Retief, warning the Boer chief of the Zulu king’s profligacy with land documents.

After writing the above I had a long conversation with Mr Retief on the inconsistency of Dingarn’s conduct, and the vain hopes which he was holding out to him. I told him of the grant of country to the English government, and asked him whether supposing the settlers at Port Natal objected to their occupying the country of Victoria, except on their becoming subject again to the British Government, they would occupy it on these terms? He plainly said No (Owen, 1926, 63).

Retief was adamant, though, that the Boers would carry out Dingane’s wish, saying that “the expedition against the native chief... was necessary, ... for a vindication of their own

character” (Owen, 1926, 64). It is apparent that the Boers were interested in co-operating with Dingane at least as long as it took to get a land grant document signed by him. Dingane, on the other hand, was demanding that the Boers should act as tributaries to him and that Retief as a tributary chief, should demonstrate his acceptance of that role through his willingness to undertake tasks for the Zulu king, including attacking his enemies (as the earlier group of settlers had done for his predecessor Shaka)⁴, and submitting to his authority when it was asserted. The Boers’ failure to understand or accept this probably proved fatal to Retief and his followers. The misunderstanding was produced, I suggest, by way of the written documents, the Boers bringing different understandings as to what these written practices meant as compared to the Zulu king.

Owen continues:

We then went to the king to have his signature. Having read the letter to him I asked him in the presence of the Dutch, whether he had not already given the land which the Boers (sic) had been requesting of him to the British Government! He paused for a few minutes, and then said, “I will speak to Mr. Retief on that subject when he returns with the cattle.” (Owen, 1926, 64)

The Boers carried out Dingane’s request, and recovered and returned the Zulu cattle from Sekonyela and his Tlokwa people. The Boers also captured guns and horses in the raid, but chose to keep those for themselves. Dingane was upset at this, and got Owen to write another letter, insisting, as Owen describes it, that they

send him (Owen’s emphasis) the guns and horses along with the cattle. When the cattle, guns and horses arrived he promised to assign the Dutch some land. The whole communication was indicative of the cruelty, artfulness, trickery and ambition of the Zoolu chief... I knew not in what way to avoid writing the letter; it needed no remarks from me to convince Mr Retief of the character, duplicity and designs of the king of the Zoolus (Owen, 1926, 101).

Dingane was clearly involved in a complex strategy, wishing to establish a dominance in his relationship with the Boers and concerned about their guns, horsemanship and willingness to

⁴ Isaacs (1836) recounts how the settlers were required to fight on the side of the Zulu army against their enemies.

fight.⁵ Amongst other things, he called in an immense herd of oxen “for no other conceivable motive than to display his wealth to the Dutch. This herd consists of the white back oxen only but it was without number” (Owen, 1926, 61). Dingane also collected in a large number of men from different parts of his kingdom to dance for the Boers. Both the colour-coded cattle and the dancing soldiers were undoubtedly signs, pointing to the magnificence of the Zulu king, though it is not evident that the Boers read them that way.

Retief’s written answer to Dingane’s letter demanding the guns and horses heightened the tension further. As Owen described it Retief kept the horses and guns, and replied in a letter that “contained some excellent reflections and advice on the conduct of wicked kings” that the chief Umzelekazi had been ruined

because he had not kept God’s word but had made war when he ought not. He [Retief] referred him [Dingane] to the Missionaries to tell him what God had said in his word respecting kings who did not favour or obey his word (Owen, 1926, 81).

These veiled warnings were clearly not to Dingane’s liking, and probably convinced him that the Boers were a threat that had to be dealt with. They had defeated the Ndebele, led by Mzilikazi, and were now threatening him. The following extracts from Owen’s diary summarize the way these events climaxed, and the pivotal role of letters and documents in these dynamics is again apparent:

February 2, 1838. - Dingaan sent for me at sunset to write a letter to Mr Retief, who with a party of Boers is now on his way to the Zulu capital. The letter was characteristic of the chief. He said that his heart was now content, because he had got his cattle again. He requested that the chief of the Boers would send to all his people and order them to come up to the capital with him... He promised to gather together all his army to sing and dance. He said, “Tell them that they must bring their horses, and dance upon them, in the middle of the town, that it might be known which could dance best, the Zulus or the 'Abalungu' (the general name given to white people)”. The Dutch will be too wise to expose themselves in this manner (Owen, 1926, 104).

The Boers did indeed come as invited, and left their guns to one side as requested. Owen’s diary captures a summary of the events that followed:

February 6, 1838. - A dreadful day in the annals of the mission... the usual messenger came, with hurry and anxiety depicted in his looks. He (Dingane) sent to tell me not

⁵ The boers had just recently defeated the powerful Ndebele led by Mzilikazi, so Dingane had good reason to be aware of their military capabilities (Davenport, 1977, 58; Owen, 1926; Hamilton, 1998).

to be frightened as he was going to kill the Boers. .. “There!” said someone, “they are killing the Boers now!” (Owen, 1926, 107)

... Two of the Boers [had] paid me a visit this morning, and breakfasted only an hour or two before they were called into eternity. When I asked them what they thought of Dingaan they said that he was good; -so unsuspecting were they of his intentions. He had promised to assign over to them the whole country between the Tugela and the Umzimvubu Rivers, and this day the paper of transfer was to have been signed! (Owen, 1926, 108)

The historical record shows some puzzlement as to why Retief should have made himself and his followers so vulnerable to this kind of attack:

Retief failed to read Dingane’s mind, rather presumptuously lectured him on the defeat of Mizilikazi as a sign of divine disapproval, yet walked into Dingane’s carefully prepared trap on 6 February 1838 without taking the sort of precautions which other Voortrekker leaders clearly thought necessary (Davenport, 1977, 59).

From a perspective on literacy as situated social practice, however, we can understand these dynamics. Retief appeared to share the literal fundamentalism of Calvinist ministers such as Junod, discussed earlier in this chapter, both as regards the reliability of the Bible as a source of divine wisdom, and the forcefulness of written documents. Retief had published his *Manifesto*, explaining why he and his followers were leaving the Cape Colony, in the *Graham’s Town Journal* in February 1837. Retief’s main point there, as Davenport summarizes it, was that “the authorities had abandoned the proper way of handling white-black, master-servant relationships, and offended the law of God as well as human susceptibilities in doing so” (Davenport, 1977, 40). Retief’s reliance on the literalness and God-guaranteed reliability of the written word, together with his assumptions of white superiority (apparent in his views on master-servant relationships from his *Manifesto*), would have hindered him from realizing that Dingane could make such tactical use of documents. He apparently took comfort from the assurances in writing that Dingane sent him, and chose, for whatever reason, to ignore the doubtful value of land-grant documents under such conditions. Dingane, on the other hand, took advantage of the credibility that the written communications drafted by the pious missionary held for the other Europeans, and held no deeply felt commitment to the veracity of the written word. He used these written

communications in ways that were consistent with his own interests and political commitments.

In the aftermath of these events, Dingane's soldiers attacked other nearby Boer settlements, all but destroying the Voortrekker presence in Natal, until the arrival of Boer reinforcements (Andries Pretorius arrived with a commando of 500 men) and the military defeat of the Zulu at Blood River in December 1838 (Davenport, 1977). The first Boer state, the Republic of Natalia was established and lasted for six years before it was subsumed into the British Empire (Davenport, 1977). Owen was allowed to leave Dingane's homestead in February 1838, attempted to set up a ministry amongst the Dutch settlers, but did not succeed and after spending some time at the Bay of Natal, left on a boat for the Cape Colony in May that year. In his journal he summarized his thoughts on the failure of his Mission:

The pride and insolence of the Zoolu chiefs are the main hindrances to the promulgation of the truth. When that pride is abated, the way will be made more easy for the entrance of the Gospel. God is now humbling the pride of the nation generally, and of chiefs in particular, he has permitted them to fall by their own pride, self-conceit and wickedness into such an atrocity as will in all probability bring ruin upon themselves and the nation, from which it will never recover and thus the way will be prepared for the missionaries of the word. In the view of this we adore the inscrutable ways of Providence and perceive that the very fact which is driving us away from the country will ultimately contribute to the establishment of the truth (Owen, 1926, 120).

In conclusion to this historically focused section of my thesis, I would note that Owen's thoughts are apt in that the spread of literacy and Christianity in southern Africa went together in tightly linked ways, in most cases, and were closely dependant on the military conquest or political domination of local people for their expansion. But we can also clearly see from the above study why they never spread or operated in the linear and predictable ways that Owen and others would have hoped. Literacy never simply, on its own, in some kind of autonomous way, operated as a portal through which subjugated local people were cognitively re-orientated, where the master codes of local knowledge were removed and replaced by western ones, as de Kock (1996) suggested had happened, at least for a select group of African missionary pupils who attended the Lovedale Mission station, which was the focus of De Kock's study. Ong (1982) was wrong, along with the other 'great divide' theorists of literacy whom I reviewed at the start of this historical investigation. These dynamics were much more variable, politicized and complex than the autonomous model would suggest. A social practices model that is sensitive to the networked, historically

contingent and socially relative effects of knowledge and practices provides a better way of examining and understanding the historical record.

I continue in the chapters that follow with the work of applying and developing a social practices approach to literacy. In the following two chapters I examine two studies about early childhood literacy in contemporary times. I draw on and extend the conceptual resources I have developed here for studying literacy as an active and variable meaning-making resource in situated social practice.

Further application of the social practices approach to literacy in South Africa

(ii) The study of early childhood literacy:

Chapter Six: Early childhood literacy practices in formal educational contexts

I argued in the previous chapters, at a theoretical level and at an empirical level, that a social practices approach to literacy reveals that literacy does not have the uniformity or monolithic quality that is sometimes associated with it. In relation to the literacy of children, the question arises as to whether ethnographic research can expand on or modify our understandings of how reading and writing are first encountered, experienced, acquired and come to take effect. Heath's study (1983), reviewed in chapter one stands out amongst the studies discussed in this thesis so far as having a focus on early childhood literacy, and of showing in that regard how literacies and orientations to reading and writing are multiple rather than singular, and take divergent forms depending on the contexts which sustain them.

Studies of literacy as situated social practice have not previously focused on children's literacy in South Africa. Much like other studies of literacy as situated social practice that focused on adults, the SoUL study had a limited focus on and engagement with questions of learning and acquisition, referring at a somewhat generalized and undeveloped level to social processes of apprenticeship learning and mediation practices as the key learning mechanisms of literacy by adults in everyday social life, and developing only minor examples of such learning.¹ In contrast to studies in adult literacy generally, there is a very much larger body of work internationally on early childhood literacy, but far fewer that have drawn on the New Literacy Studies or studied literacy from a socio-cultural perspective, or studied literacy as situated social practice.

The field of early childhood literacy research and teaching presents an important opportunity for applying and extending the conceptual and methodological resources of the social practices approach to literacy, from a different vantage point on these dynamics than in the earlier chapters. The SoUL studies which I examined in chapters two and three concentrated on the *uses* and *values* of particular literacy practices and less on questions of literacy *learning*. Nor did I address

¹ Gibson's 1996 study, discussed earlier, provided the most sustained and detailed examples of situated acquisition processes from among the SoUL studies, though only at a descriptive level.

questions of learning directly in chapters four and five, which had a historical focus. Questions around literacy learning and development feature prominently in childhood studies and there is a richer and wider literature addressing these concerns as regards children than there is as regards adults. Adult literacy education has operated in the larger shadow of schooling (Prinsloo, Millar and Morphet, 1993; Moss, 2001).

The study of early childhood literacy also provides the opportunity for a fresh and productive perspective on the question of the relationship between literacy as written language practices and other forms and modalities of sign-based communication. Such study raises the important question of how distinctions between reading and writing as print-based activities are first made by children and then applied and developed in relation to the forms of signifying practices involving other media and modalities of communication.

The field of early childhood literacy provision is caught up in the larger educational question of how children develop successful careers in reading and writing in relation to schooling outcomes and the labour market. As a result, research into child literacy is a substantial enterprise in countries such as the USA and in European countries, attracting funding and attention from government and corporations far in excess of adult literacy as an enterprise (Torres, 2001; Prinsloo, 2005). Child literacy is widely regarded as an investment for the future. The resources that go into the study and development of child literacy are directly related to the importance of schooling as a social institution for the production of human capital and a national citizenry, and to anxieties in contemporary times about productivity and regional competitiveness in global markets (Carnoy and Castells, 1999). Child literacy activities (research and development) in the wealthier countries have benefited directly from attention and investments in times of political crises.² While such crisis-stimulated developments in the early childhood literacy field reflect their origins and bias in that they come out of industrialized and affluent settings, they have nonetheless had global influence.

² For example, the launching of the sputnik satellite in the 1950s led to major investments of funds and research in child literacy in the USA, for purposes of lifting national competitiveness under the conditions of the 'Cold War' with the USSR. In the 1960s, the 'war against poverty' in the USA, concerned with reducing the levels of social inequality and social instability, led to a further expansion of research and development in child literacy, this time concerned with addressing the inequalities in outcomes between rich and poor, and particularly between black and white children in that country (Karabel and Halsey, 1977; Crawford, 1995; Hall, Larson and Marsh, 2003).

I review the key developments in this field that have set up early childhood literacy as a productive field of enquiry. I identify what a social practices approach contributes to this debate and apply this perspective in the examination of two examples of children's early literacy practices, firstly in a study of formal settings and, in the following chapter I contrast that study with a study of children's informal play, so as to examine the sign-making, meaning-making and literacy-linked communicative practices that characterize those settings. I show what ethnographic enquiry can reveal of how literacy-related learning happens in these two different settings. I examine how early childhood literacy is constructed as a particular practice at three early childhood educational sites in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, with consequences for children's learning and, in the next chapter, ask what a study of children's play can illuminate of how children communicate in informal settings.

Early childhood literacy research: Reading as processing skills

In early childhood and early school literacy, a focus on *reading* has received far more attention than any of the other language and literacy processes (Adams 1990; Chall, Jacobs and Baldwin 1990; Pressley, 1998; Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). An emphasis on 'reading readiness', linked with phonics-based instruction, intermittently dominated early literacy research and educational thinking for much of the 20th century into the 1980s (Chall, 1967; Adams, 1990; Crawford, 1995; Hall, Larson and Marsh, 2003) in the USA, particularly, as well as the United Kingdom, and, through their influences, in various other parts of the world where English has been a dominant language. In the 'reading readiness' perspective literacy was seen as primarily a perceptual, associative and individualized activity centred on sound/symbol relationships, and supposedly requiring a mental age of around seven before it could start. The influences of behaviourism (Skinner, 1957) and cognitive processing models (Adams, 1990), in particular, led researchers and educators to conceive of reading as the acquisition of a series of discrete perceptual skills, particularly that of phonics-recognition, and preceded by a range of perceptual and response skills which could be taught/acquired and mastered sequentially by children.

As Goodman (1984, 79) and Gee (1999a, 4) have suggested, the result has been the isolation in educational theory of reading from other language, meaning-making and communicative processes, and the development of a highly developed but theoretically shallow technology of reading instruction. It has often framed the issues and problems narrowly in terms of decoding,

word recognition, and comprehension of “literal meaning”, rather than in terms of language, literacy, and learning as they are encountered, learnt and used within multiple contexts and practices, in schools and out of schools. For example Flesch's (1955, 121) view was that “[we should teach the child] letter-by-letter and sound-by-sound until he (sic) knows it—and when he knows it, he knows how to read” and that “learning to read is like learning to drive a car.... The child learns the mechanics of reading, and when he's through, he can read” (Flesch, 1981, 3). Harris (1995, 6) has pointed out that such approaches to reading

treat the sign as something externally given, an object already provided by society for the learner to ‘acquire’ and utilize. In spite of all the talk of ‘cognitive’ abilities, it is as if learning to read and write were in the end on a par with learning how to use a knife and fork.

As a semiotician he was concerned that there was no analysis of the sign itself, “even though it is assumed that the sign is somehow the linchpin of the whole communicational enterprise” (Harris, 1995, 6). The design resources that children and adults draw on to make and take meaning in alphabetic reading and writing do indeed involve the phonographic ‘code’, which relates sounds (phonemes) to letter features. However, a simple matching between script characters and units in the spoken language does not at all sum up what (alphabetical) writing is about. As Harris (1995) argued through detailed analysis of the semiotics of speech and writing, the signs of writing function in a way that is basically different from the signs of speech, even where the purpose of the written text is to record a spoken message. At a bio-mechanical level, the vocal apparatus produces the spoken utterance as a stream of sound, which can be interrupted and varied in volume and quality, but cannot use two or three dimensional contrasts of any kind, so that writing inevitably misrepresents the nature of the speech signal. There is no counterpart in speech to the way in which it is possible in writing to vary the dispositions of marks on a surface (Harris, 1995, 46). In Harris’ analysis, writing systems consist of scripts that use notation systems. Scripts are a notation plus sets of procedures for deploying them, and scripts invariably confer additional structuring on the notations they utilize (Harris, 1995, 106). (The role of *parentheses* and *italics* are simple illustrations of the ways in which writers use graphic space that do not have direct correspondences in speech.) Harris’s distinction between notations and scripts is a useful one, from a literacy as situated social practices perspective. It helps us to begin to explain why a simple matching between characters and units in the spoken language doesn’t work. Attempts to structure the writing system at the phoneme level assume that there is only one relevant structural

patterning in a script, whereas this is obviously not the case. English, with its complex spellings, is a good example of this point. Harris (1995, 56) argued that we should rather see writing (that is, a particular writing system) as a set of social practices associated with an inventory of written forms. At the level of script, for example, there are numerous features of writing which are the product of historical acts and choices made by individuals and groups with influence, which features endure for reasons that are distinct from the question of how characters in writing map to units in the spoken language. Secondly, reading and writing are never simply about the coding and decoding of a commonly shared language. Certain languages, language registers, discourse patterns and writing practices have what Bourdieu (1991) called *linguistic capital*. At the level of language design, the making and taking of meaning in reading and writing is as much about forms of vocabulary, syntax, and discourse connectors that map to specific styles or registers of language (Gee, 1999a) as it is about basic coding practices. Such discourse patterns are in turn tied to the social practices (including values, hierarchies and commitments) of particular groups of people linked together by some or other form of common activity. As I have already argued, in the previous chapters in this thesis, such groups are not fixed or unchanging in their membership or make-up, but the endurance of particular high status forms of language and literacy in institutional settings shows that change is limited in those contexts. Success for children in school involves their being able to situate the proper meanings for words, phrases and sentences within schooling's historically specific ways of making meaning, attaching value, thinking and doing.

Early childhood literacy research: Emergent literacy perspectives

One result of the kind of 'basic skills' approach to literacy described above, which understands literacy as a mechanical decoding exercise, as it has been applied in educational contexts, is that there has been little focus on children's active engagement with meaning-making resources. However, under the influence of Piagetian studies of children's thinking, a focus on *emergent literacy* has developed amongst some educational researchers from the 1960s. In New Zealand, Clay (1966) coined the term in a study which demonstrated that well before schooling, children in a literate environment develop considerable knowledge about the forms and functions of reading and writing (Clay, 1966, 1979). Her claims were elaborated on by influential research conducted by Read (1971) in the USA. Read's work focused on the coding aspects of children's emergent literacy and showed that children's early writing efforts, through their own explorations

in informal, home-based drawing and play-writing activities, before they had received any direct formal instruction, included invented spelling systems, or *invented writing*, that were strikingly similar across a number of children in their differences from established orthography, as well as being phonetically consistent. Read (1971) claimed that the consistency in the kinds of ‘mistakes’ the children in the study made (e.g., spelling the word *drag* as *jag*; using E for ‘short i’ as in SET for sit, A for ‘short e’ as in BAG for beg) were not random, nor were they the result of auditory/phonological immaturity or deficit. Instead, they were quite logical; given the knowledge base the children were operating from (for example, the first phoneme in *drag* does sound like and is articulated like the first phoneme in *jet*) (Scharer and Zutell, 2003). Read concluded that, “We can no longer assume that children must approach reading with no discernible prior conception of its structure” (Read, 1971, 34). Follow-up studies (see e.g., Clay, 1972; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Teale & Sulzby, 1986) both confirmed and amplified Read’s (1971) original findings. The study of children’s ‘errors’ as regards spelling and syntax turned out to be highly productive sites for studying what kinds of strategies they were following and that were in conflict with conventional orthography.

These studies were the first to turn attention to the active nature of children’s early sign-making development. Researchers studied how children of pre-school age in literate environments were paying attention to print, and that engagement with literacy was certainly beginning before instruction and schooling. A new field of study emerged focusing on how even very young children were strategic learners. Literacy came to be seen as a broader set of print-related behaviors than those conventionally experienced in education. Piagetian researchers such as Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982), Clay (1972, 1975) and others stressed that active, age-appropriate engagement with their surroundings is required for children’s cognitive development. Cognitive growth is seen as being triggered by the child’s encounters and responses. Children emerge as readers through immersion and participation in a print environment, through a series of learning experiences that encourage engagement with both spoken and written language, and these experiences are enhanced in supportive environments that encourage experimentation and risk-taking. This emergent perspective is based on the premise that children bring sense-making strategies to literacy events and actively make sense of their worlds (Clay 1969, Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982).

Many, although not all, of the analyses around emergent literacy come from environments that are literacy rich, and also reflected the child-centered, 'progressive education' (Cope and Kalantzis, 1993) concerns of English-language educators that were then influential in those more affluent settings. However, the work of Ferreiro that has been so influential in this regard was largely carried out in work with children living in slum conditions in South America. Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) described children's knowledge not so much as fixed facts but as sets of hypotheses from which they work: hypotheses about the role of graphic elements, about styles of language (genres) and about what elements of language can be represented in print. Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) criticized the emphasis in Latin American public schools on decoding at the expense of meaning- and sense-making activities, and similar criticisms have been made by others of schools in African rural and urban contexts (Williams, 1996; Nelson Mandela Foundation/ HSRC, 2005; Prinsloo and Stein, 2004).

Early childhood literacy research: Cognition and literacy as situated social practices

As described in chapter one, Scribner and Cole (1981), drawing on Vygotsky (1962, 1978), developed what they called a 'social practice' account of literacy. Their analysis identified knowledge, skills and technologies as the components of practice. Later work in the field of situated cognition draws on these and related insights to develop a model of cognition as embodied, situated, social, and distributed across people and things (New London Group, 1996, 82; Rogoff and Lave, 1984; Rogoff, 1990; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wertsch, 1993; Wertsch and Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1999). At the basis of claims about the social dimensions of cognition is Vygotsky's argument that interpersonal/inter-mental processes are the precursors and necessary condition for the emergence of individual/intra-mental (psychological) processes: "Any higher mental function was external [and] social before it was internal. It was once a social relationship between two people" (Vygotsky 1962, 197).

Applied to early childhood literacy, the claim here is that children's early hands-on experiences with language and literacy in everyday social activities give rise to the internal mental processes that are used to do the intellectual work of reading and writing activity. One of the main resources for these perspectives has been the ways in which these researchers have developed the Vygotskian concept of the 'zone of proximal development'. This concept has been variously used to refer to a conceptual 'space' or difference between a child's level of independent performance

and that child's level of maximally assisted performance (Bodrova, 1998, Vygotsky, 1978); or between the problem-solving abilities exhibited by learners when working alone and when working with others. An essential aspect of interaction in the 'zone of proximal development' ('zone' or 'zo-ped', as it is termed, in abbreviation, by several scholars including some discussed below) is that less capable participants can participate in forms of interaction that are beyond their competence when they are acting alone. Learning is an active process within the zone where learners acquire new knowledge by way of being scaffolded, or assisted by others (Bruner, 1986). The process of learning in the zone involves *internalizing* the external operation at work in the social interaction. Internalization, according to Vygotsky (1978) is the internal reconstruction of an external operation that leads to abstraction. Wertsch and Cole (1996) suggested that culture and cognition create each other within the zone, via a dynamic interrelationship between people and social worlds. Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López and Tejada (1999, 287) point out that such zo-peds are often also disharmonious and hybrid spaces, with conflict, tension and diversity, but that such sites where activities are polycontextual, multivoiced and multiscripted can be productive as sites of rupture, innovation and change that also lead to learning.

A key implication of these arguments is a view of mind as no longer located entirely inside the head. "Cognition", in Gee's (1999, 15) phrase, "leaks out of one's head and across other people and various tools and technologies" in this socio-cultural model of cognition. Cognition is interactive, shared, and distributed. Gee pointed out that from this socio-cultural perspective of cognition it is no longer helpful to ask if X knows Y; rather, one must ask whether X working with others and with various tools and technologies "including forms of language, images, symbols, computers, and much more" (Gee, 1999, 14) and within a specific social activity, can accomplish Y. Mind does not 'stop with the skin' in this perspective, and cannot be bounded by the head nor even by the body, as the relationship between individual and social environment is much more dynamic than has been assumed in other cognitive models, including those based on Piaget, and this model applies also to literacy studies from within a social practices perspective. As Bomer (2003, 243-4) describes it:

For our purposes, the "mind" of the child learning to write and read extends through their hands, into tools, into the work in the room, often with others, within particular valued ways of doing things. We must, as Wertsch advocates, take persons acting with mediational means as the unit of analysis, careful not to inscribe systems that cut off any of the important channels.

Perhaps the most striking implication of this perspective on cognition as social/material and distributed is the importance of seeing reading as one part of children's language, knowledge and social activity and thus to see literacy embedded in children's social lives. The teaching of isolated skills, such as phonic recognition, might help children to read and write but only in a highly restricted form, unless they are able to make sense of reading and writing as part of larger sets of situated practices.

In the light of the perspective and debates reviewed above, I analyse research data from three pre-school centres. The data was gathered as part of the Children's Early Literacy Learning (CELL) research project.³ While the CELL research was carried out in the Western Cape, Gauteng and the Northern Province, I draw here again only on research data that was carried out in and around Khayelitsha.⁴ The analysis presented here was written in the first instance for the purposes of this thesis but feeds into the collected work of the CELL research project.⁵ I am concerned to examine what particular understandings of literacy and larger processes of communication and meaning-making can be observed in the study of literacy education as social practice, and what these mean for children's development of careers as readers and writers. I show how the conceptual and methodological resources I am using here can usefully illuminate key failures in specific educational contexts to address children's early literacy development in productive ways. At a general level, literacy in school contexts, as I show, is often approached as if literacy involves a predetermined and decontextualized practice of making and taking meaning in passively receptive ways.

³ I initiated and directed the CELL research project together with Pippa Stein at the University of the Witwatersrand and Carole Bloch at the Programme for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA). It was funded by a Major Grant from the Spencer Foundation. A number of research assistants assisted us in gathering research data on early childhood literacy practices in home, school and local community settings in urban and some rural contexts, in the Western Cape, Gauteng and Northern Province. The work of writing up the research is still underway. (Bloch, Stein and Prinsloo, 2001; Bloch and Prinsloo 1999; Prinsloo and Stein 2005; 2004; 2003; Stein 2002; Stein and Mamabolo, 2005; Stein and Slominsky, in press).

⁴ Khayelitsha is a large residential area on the outskirts of Cape Town, in the Cape Flats, established in the 1980s to house Black migrants to Cape Town from the rural areas. It is presently home to perhaps a million people, living in construction-built four-roomed houses and in metal and cardboard shacks.

⁵ The data was recorded by Mr Jonguxolo Nana, Ms Xolisa Guzula, and Ms Pumza Mbembe who were employed by the CELL project to carry out field research and record this data. I had direct contact with the fieldwork in each case: I visited the research sites, gave input to the research assistants and managed the transcription and translation work, which was mostly carried out by Ms Ntombekaya Kundayi and checked for accuracy and consistency by the research assistants as well as by an additional Xhosa language speaker.

The three pre-schools that I discuss here are all situated in and around Khayelitsha and Gugulethu, Cape Town. The pre-schools are some of many low-budget creches, 'educare' and pre-school centres in the urban townships around Cape Town and elsewhere, operating with only limited public funding, professional training and support. The children are commonly the children of working class parents, some of them in secure jobs, others without work, living in either 'township houses' or in shacks. The pool of children that the three selected pre-schools drew from was very similar as regards their backgrounds, so the remarkable variations that I found across the three institutions that I discuss below were not a function of the differences that children brought to these institutions. The differences were rather a result of the way the teachers at each site invented their activity differently, and drew on different notions of what was important for getting children ready for schooling.

Methodological considerations

In sharp contrast to the reading readiness position and the individualized cognition perspective, a social practices perspective on early school-based literacy learning focuses on the collective, situated and distributed nature of the social activity of school-based literacy. The unit of study is therefore the classroom activities; the processes of producing meaning, negotiating meaning and the management of meaning in all their specificity and variability within particular materially located activities and practices. Children in school experience what can be done with speech, writing and other communicative modalities, in that setting. They become disposed to particular kinds of literacy practices in school settings, taking these theories and experiences of the values, constraints and possibilities of language, literacy and other communicative modalities with them into related institutional settings. The pre-schools I examine below are thus seen as sites of early literacy practices and are investigated as complex communicative, social and material spaces: sites for investigation into what is being produced by children and modeled for children with what sorts of consequences for their careers as readers and writers.

While each pre-school that I describe below could be said to be concerned with giving children a common pre-school curriculum of knowledge of the alphabet, nursery rhymes and songs, and exercises in 'how to listen' (i.e., getting used to following customary teacher directives at a group and individualized level), the substance and social interactions that framed these activities varied in important ways. I now examine these details in the case of the first of three pre-schools. I

examine what these comparative case studies show in relation to the issues that I have presented at the beginning of this chapter.

Recitation, repertoire and performance

The first school presents an example of a common take on learning, where the focus is on recitation. This Centre, which I call Them bani Educare Centre, was first given space at the local Ethiopian church, an Africanized, 'independent' or syncretist Christian church which refigures Christian worship against African religious and cultural practices, including ancestor veneration (Moeti, 1981). Initially, a small hall was built alongside the church with funds donated by the Urban Foundation, a big-business-supported charity. Subsequently, Them bani relocated to a donated site in the township, where two makeshift shack-style rooms (or '*hokkies*') were built, with planks. One was situated next to the gate facing the street, and was used as a kitchen and administration office. The other was used as the pre-school classroom for the twenty or so children. The building was not a secure one and the children were at some risk of falling planks. The Centre had been burgled and stripped of resources on two occasions prior to our research presence.

Parents paid R50 per month to leave a child at the Centre, though the Centre's principal/teacher said that only a few managed to pay regularly. A number of children were being raised by their grandparents, supported by small state pensions. The principal, 'Mrs Sibhene', a middle-aged woman, saw herself as filling a significant need for child-carers in the township. She told a story about a single mother in Nyanga who had left her two children locked inside her house (for their own protection) while she was at work. A fire started inside the house and both children were burned to death. It was also apparent that child-minding was one of only very few money-making opportunities, along with hawking of food and domestic work, available to women in an area where unemployment was common.

Mrs Sibhene had done a two-year part-time course in pre-primary teaching, run at St Francis, the local adult night school in Langa, Cape Town, as well as a short course run by a local development charity (the Community Chest) where she learnt administrative skills, including keeping a receipt book and basic book keeping. She employed other staff, including another teacher, a male caretaker, and a kitchen worker who prepared food for the children.

While she and the other teacher were absent or busy, attending to administrative matters, for example, including the purchase of food and equipment, the children were often left in the care of the male caretaker, 'Mr Kutumani', a man in his late fifties, an enthusiastic and charismatic teacher, with a distinctive, untrained style and curriculum of his own, and a large reservoir of Xhosa-language poems, prayers and narratives that he taught the children.

For all three teachers the curriculum was broken into three key functions: teacher-led direct instruction characterized by collective rote-and chant-learning; supervised play-time where the children were left to play with each other in the small play-ground; and eating and drinking times. Explicit pedagogy was exclusively dedicated to recitation. Between them the principal and Mr Kutumani had taught the children to collectively and sometimes individually recite a large and varied body of songs, rhymes, prayers, psalms, poems and chants in both Xhosa and English.

Recitation as pedagogy

Mrs S. taught the children, whose ages ranged from four to seven, to perform the following chant:

Mrs S:	Lelethu, Lelethu
Children:	Aksha, kusha dana
Children and Mrs S:	Akusha, kusha dana
Children and Mrs S:	Hesheshe kakatu ha-ha, hupa, aah hupa le bafana, aah hopa hesheshe hesheshe tamati ha-ha tamati ha-ha, aah hishima fana aah hishuma, aa hishima fana, aah hishima, Aah Yeeee-eeee

While reciting the made-up sequence of sound-words the children performed an elaborate 'war dance' which involved limited but precise dance steps and much beating of chests, flexing of muscles and combative gestures towards an imaginary opponent. At the last line they leapt into the air and screamed in unison. This was Mrs Sibhene's version of the *haka*, the Maori war chant enacted by the 'All Blacks', the New Zealand national rugby team, which she had taught the children. It was an imaginative reconstruction of the exotic sounds of the Maori chant that she had heard and seen on the television screen, and included Xhosa words at random, such as *tamati* (tomato) and *bafana* and *fana* (boys). The children enthusiastically engaged in the exercise, and learnt to use movements and sound patterns where the sounds were nonsense sounds but

nonetheless precise in their sequence. As a pre-reading activity which was likely to enhance children's phonemic awareness (their sense of the sounds of spoken language and how they merge and combine) this exercise might be said to be a successful example of local pedagogy, at that level.

However, I want to focus on the recitative dimensions. Children learnt the chant by doing it, collectively, learning from each other and distributing the knowledge of the sequence amongst each other, so that they collectively sustained one another in their learning. While chant learning makes complete sense when it is about learning the *haka*, it is also part of a particular orientation to learning (or pre-learning) when it comes to reading and writing. The task was one of successful, collective reproduction of a sequence, without any meaning-making or reflexive deployment of these signs and sounds in any other way. The same strategy was brought to the chant-learning of the alphabet in English, and numbers from One to Ten in English and Xhosa. Alphabet and number charts pasted on the walls of the rooms were used to initiate these exchanges and apparently to introduce the children to the graphic images that represent letters and numerals.

The following is illustrative of such moments. (Mr Kutumani, caretaker = Mr K.; Children = C)

Mr K: Ngubani lo? (*what is this*) (pointing to the number chart)

C: Ngu-one, two, three, .. (and they continue counting up to ten).

Mr K: Masibaleni ngesiXhosa (*Let's count in Xhosa*)

C: Inye, zimbini, zintathu, zine, zintlanu, zintandathu, sixhenxe, etc. (*One, two, three, four, five, six seven, etc, up to ten.*)

Mr K: Masiphindeni (*let's do it again*)

C: Inye, zimbini, etc. (*one, two, etc. - to ten*)

Mr K: Siya phaya ke ngoku (*we are going there now*) (he points to the alphabet chart).

Mr K: A for what (pointing at the letter, and its accompanying word and picture)

C: A for apple

Mr K: B

C: B for ball

Mr K: C

C: C for cake

Mr K: D

C: D for doll

W X

(through the rest of the alphabet, finishing off as follows)

Mr K: X

C: X for xylophone

Mr K: Y

C: Y for yacht

Mr K: Z

C: Z for Zip

There was notably no attempt to explain the meaning of words or to show the letters of the alphabet at work in any other way than in this list. The children learnt and recited these sequences with much enthusiasm and energy, the younger children following the older children in getting the words and sequence right. Learning was thus distributed and supported by the group acting together.

Mr Kutumani noted, in an aside to the researcher, that the children were doing fine, but were having problems with calling out the words *xylophone* and *yacht* and he had to help them to pronounce those words. He did not however try to explain or use these exotic, unfamiliar and arguably inappropriate exemplars. Nor was there any effort to get the children to use these resources in any way besides their recitation as part of a list.

Numbers were learnt in a similarly fashion:

Mrs S: Numbers one up to ten

C: Numbers one up to ten

Mrs S: One cloud (reading off the numbers chart on the wall)

C: One cloud

Mrs S: Two dinosaurs

C: Two dinosaurs

Mrs S: Three trains

C: Three trains

Mrs S: Four masks

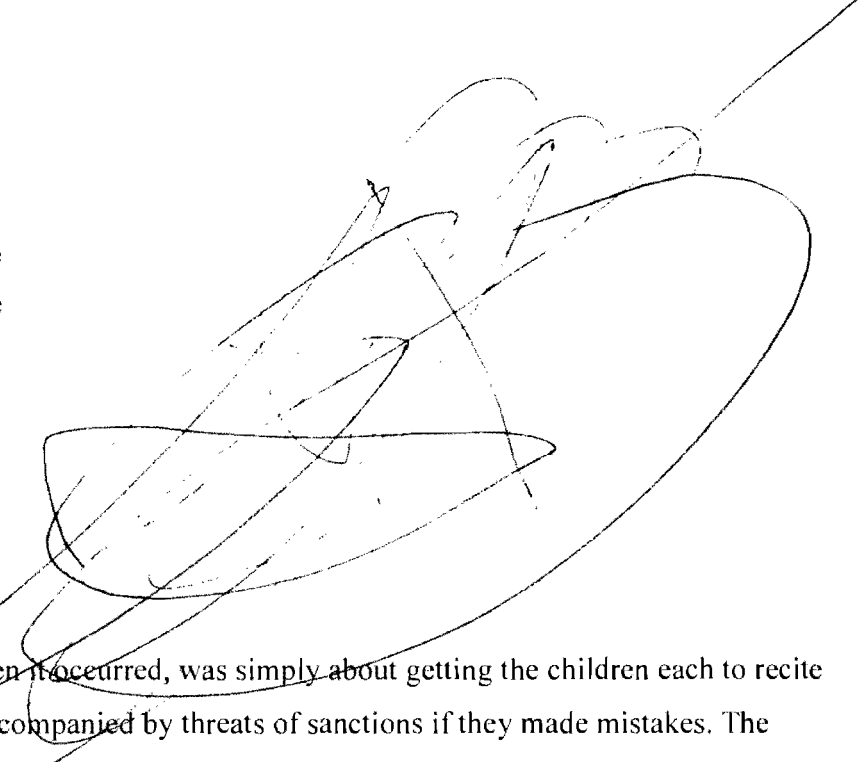
C: Four masks

Mrs S: Five scissors

C: Five scissors

Mrs S: Six cars

C: Six cars



Mrs S: Seven aeroplane

C: Seven aeroplane

Mrs S: Eight gifts

C: Eight gifts

Mrs S: Nine pencils

C: Nine pencils

Mrs S: Ten butterflies

C: Ten butterflies

Individualized pedagogy, when it occurred, was simply about getting the children each to recite the sequence on their own, accompanied by threats of sanctions if they made mistakes. The cognitive procedures that children were encouraged to internalize in this activity can be described as naming practices. Attaching names to specific things, located in lists, probably has some use, but when it is identified as what school learning is about, such practices can be seen as problematic learning activities. Extended to later literacy learning, to such activities as practicing the recitation of phonic drills, they become even more problematic, in that they do not represent or initiate the social and cognitive strategies that go into the practices of reading and writing, except in the very restricted version of reading and writing as naming activities.

Song and dance

While the only modality of formal learning was that of chant-learning, the children's repertoire of learnt songs, poems, prayers and rhymes was impressively large and varied, and absorbing for them. It included traditional English nursery rhymes, Xhosa rhymes, religious hymns, prayers and psalms, Xhosa traditional praise poems, and several of the teachers' own design, drawing off popular and TV culture, like the *haka* described above, as well as from religious sources.

English nursery rhymes that the children learnt included such standards as *Wee Willie Winky* and *Jack and Jill* (which was taught in both English and Xhosa versions). The children were markedly uncomfortable with obscure English-language rhymes such as *Wee Willy Winkie* and mumbled and stumbled their way through them. In contrast, their learnt repertoire of Xhosa-language and Ethiopian church poetry was considerably more confident and joyful. When they were left to initiate their own songs and chants, it became clear that their favourites were Xhosa-language rhymes.

In the transcript below, while Mr Kutumani was attending to a crying child, the children carried on with their own selections. This one is called Unogwaja (a rabbit) and was full of sound and action in the Xhosa original:

Children: Nanku unogwaja, (Here is a rabbit)
wandophula! Shunqu. (It broke me! Sound of something
breaking.)
Esinqeni (In the waist line)
Shunqu (the sound of something breaking)
Esikabani (Whose waist line?)
Shunqu
Joni kabani? (Johnny who)
Joni kabani?
Shunqu
Joni maqanda (Johnny eggs)
Shunqu
Gokwe, Gokwe (a young boy's name)
Betha lendoda (Hit this man)
Le ndoda (this man)
Hayi bantwana (No children)
Bantwana (Children)
Phezu kwelwandle! (Over the sea)

Another favourite of the children was the story of a girl, Nomathemba, whose beauty was noted by way of reference to her light skin, who married a lawyer. This rhyme was remarkably one of only a few that were common to the repertoire of all the pre-schools in the study where Xhosa was the home language of the children, across very varied settings, including both badly resourced and better resourced schools.

Unomathemba (Nomathemba)
Yintombi enjani (What kind of girl is she?)
Yintombi emhlophe (She is light in complexion)
Yendele phi (Who did she marry?)
Yendele egqwetheni (She married a lawyer)
Zingaphi inkomo (How many cows paid for lobola?)

Zimbini kuphela (Two only)
 Baqumba abazali (The parents were not satisfied)
 Ubambe umthetho (She broke the law)
 Wendile wendile, (She's married, she's married)
 Wendile wendile (She's married, she's married)

Perhaps the social messages about love, status and transgression carried in this rhyme appealed to the children in much the same way that stories of princes and beautiful princesses have appeal to many children in Europe and North America.

Lastly, a primarily Xhosa language nonsense-rhyme which the children greatly enjoyed involved a cue/response chant led by Mrs Sibhene. The children particularly delighted in pronouncing the complex signs of the dog's name, with its double, complex clicked consonant sounds:

Mrs S:	Mheyi (May)
Children:	Flower
Mrs S:	Mheyi
Children:	Flower
Mrs S:	Ndinenja emnyama. (I have a black dog)
Children:	Inamadzedze. (It has fleas)
Mrs S:	Ndinenja emnyama. (I have a black dog)
Children:	Inamadzedze. (It has fleas)
Mrs S:	Ngubani igama. (What is its name?)
Children:	NguSgxobhagxobha. (It's Sgxobhagxobha).

Religious recitation

The children were also taught to recite an impressively extensive, varied and often linguistically complex body of prayers, most of them in Xhosa. Having drilled the words for some time, the teachers then simply nominated these prayers and the children collectively took up the cue. Their repertoire included a number of David's psalms:

Mr K:	amelani siza kwenza indumiso twenty-onenke indumiso 21 (listen we are going to do psalm 21 lets do it all of us).
C:	ndumiso twenty-one zilumko. (Psalm 21 Song of the wise)
	Indumiso ka Davide. (David's psalm)
	Wathi masiye endlwini kaYehova. (Let's go to God's house)

inyawo zethu zafika zema, (Our feet came and stood)
emasangweni akho Yerusalem, (In your gates Jerusalem)
Yerusalem wena wakhiweyo, (Jerusalem you were built)
Ngokomzi ohlangeneyo wamnye. (Like one house)
Apho zinyuka ziye khona izizwe (Where the nations go)
Izizwe zikaYehova (God's nations).
Amen.

Mr K: Indumiso 23 (Psalm 23)

C: Indumiso 23, Indumiso kaDavide (Psalm 23, David's Psalm)
Uyehova ngumalusi wam (The Lord is my shepherd)
Andiyi kuswela nto (I shall not want)
Wenza ukuba mandibuthe emarhewini aluhlaza, (He makes me to lie down in
pastures green)
Undithundezela emanzini angawokuphumla (He leads me to the quiet water)
etc.

Besides this repertoire, the caretaker had taught the children a body of more idiosyncratic poems, many of them drawing directly on Africanist Christian poems associated with the Ethiopian church, which mixed prophetic Christianity with images and narrative from African culture. For example, the children learnt a long and complex narrative, probably sourced from prophetic narratives of the Ethiopian church. The opening lines were as follows:

Vukani kusile magwalandini (Wake up it's the morning you cowards)
Yabinza inkwenkwezi isixelela (The star told us)
Labetha ixilongo lisibizela (The trumpet rang calling us)
Ndithe ndinika ubukumkani (I said I give you the King)
Ndithe ndinika imfundo (I said I give you education)
Nayishunqula (You cut it)
Ndithe ndinika umhlaba (I gave you earth)
Nawushunqula (And you cut it)

The children had learnt the whole prayer by repeating it line by line after Mr K, and practicing it repeatedly over time.

Setting children up

What did children take away from this pre-school when they headed off to school? Unlike most schools and pre-schools, the curriculum was eclectic in its blending and mixing knowledge and language resources drawn from diverse cultural and narrative sources and communications media. The teachers passed on to the children a genuine pleasure in the reproduction of a varied repertoire. But the emphasis on recitation meant that the children had not been prepared for school through learning to make as opposed to taking meaning. They had no experience in analyzing, synthesizing or constructing their own stories from available resources, no experience in composing as opposed to reproduction, or writing as opposed to copying. While these songs might be seen as a useful resource that later school teachers could draw on to encourage creativity and versatility on the part of their children, in practice they tend to be ignored by school teachers who draw on children's repertoires of songs only for filler exercises, for quietening down talkative children or for getting children's attention before moving on to what they see as the real stuff of school learning (Prinsloo and Bloch, 1999; Prinsloo and Stein, 2003). However, the children's skills in recall and reciting word-for-word might well have prepared them for times in school when they would encounter the rote learning and list-learning strategies that are characteristic in most non-elite schools in South Africa (Prinsloo and Bloch, 1999; Pludemann et al, 1998). While these children had gained knowledge of the alphabet, nursery rhymes and had learnt 'how to listen', it is apparent that the particular kind of social interaction that the teachers promoted in this classroom had also communicated particular attitudes to the social construction of knowledge. In the collective activity system of this pre-school classroom the children were encouraged to internalize conceptions of what was relevant; to develop habits of engaging mentally in relation to sign-based practices. They would perform enthusiastically and well in rote learning exercises, and in choral singing activities, but they would not have had any school-based encounters with reading and writing as interpretative and meaning making activities. Instead, they would be likely to expect that school learning is about recitation and naming practices. Extended to the practice of phonic and syllabic drill exercises in their early literacy classes, they would very likely identify school reading and writing as being the same kinds of activities that they encountered in pre-school.

Regulating literacy and regulating children

I now turn to the second school which I call Sivile Pre-school, in a part of Khayelitsha that had been only recently developed, providing modest housing for primarily salaried workers, mainly teachers, police, nurses and their families. After the suburb had been developed in 1991, two show-houses that were not sold were donated by the housing company to the local community, which decided to use them for a child-care centre.

The Centre was sponsored by the Cape Provincial Administration which paid the teacher salaries. The Centre had around 50 children and charged fees of R60 per month. A school-like hierarchy existed, with a principal, a deputy principal and two teachers, with small pay differentials between the principal and the teachers. A cook was also employed to prepare food daily for the children. There were ongoing tensions between the principal and that teacher, over decision-making, time-keeping and uses of money, and the principal was quite open about these tensions, off the record, when she expressed her leadership difficulties. She complained that all her teachers "have a problem of punctuality". The principal referred to sources of conflict and tension amongst the staff, over salaries and responsibilities. These descriptions of conflict would suggest that the centre was a troubled one, with possibly serious problems amongst staff and little commitment to excellence. The teachers at the Centre were nonetheless confident that they were doing good work. As one of them put it,

Do you think the government sees the huge work that we do? We carry these children, teach them to sit, to wee independently, to feed themselves such that we don't teach in January and February. We start in March. For now we are getting them used to our lifestyle here. We take them out; make them happy so that the next day they wake up with interest to come to school. Do you think the government doesn't see this? We prepare these children for Grade One. Grade One teachers take ready-made and prepared children.

Parents also saw the Centre as doing good work. One mother, the wife of a policeman, said, "We decided to take (our child) to the Sivile Educare because it is cheap and *ikufuphi and abantwana abaphuma phaya baphuma baclever*." (it's nearer and children who come from them are clever).

It is the processes of aiming to produce "ready-made and prepared children" that I focus on here. These processes of discipline and focusing the attention of the children provide the backdrop to their early literacy learning. I am concerned with how procedures of disciplining are interleaved

or folded into children's school-based early engagement with modes of information, whether inscribed and printed, in visual images, spoken language or gesture. I ask the following questions: What conceptions of what is relevant are children being encouraged to internalize? What habits of engaging mentally in relation to literacy practices are being developed?

Texts and dispositions

A poem that the children learnt early and repeated often goes as follows:

Umntwana othand'iindaba mbi, mbi (A child who likes news is bad, bad)
Wofika ngapha, ejonga ngapha (She always look from side to side)
Efu'ukuphendula (Wanting to answer)
Bantwana abancinci yekani abazali (young children leave parents alone)
Bancokole, bancokole kamnandi (chat, chat nicely)

That children draw lessons from such rhymed texts, which contribute to children's social positionings and disposition, is apparent in the following exchange, where the children are being disciplined to be less noisy. In the following account, at 9.45am the children had been told to sleep or rest at their tables, while the teachers were busy or out of the room.

Sindiwe (teacher) comes out of the kitchen shouting: Hayi, hayi, hayi! Lala! Lala! (No, no, no! Sleep! Rest!⁶)

Some children sleep/rest their heads on their desks, and some carry on chatting.

Sindiwe: Heyi cwaka (Hey! Quiet)!

Child: Umntwana othand'indaba. (A child who likes news).

The child's repeating a line from the poem indicates that she knew exactly what the message was meant to be, and drew on her intertextual resources to indicate this, evidence of how she had internalized the constraining message of the poem.

It is this concern to produce docile and passive children that made up much of the teachers' concern with getting the children 'ready'. Pacifying the children with threats of punishment for

⁶ The Xhosa word *lala* translated means 'sleep' and also 'lie down' and 'rest'. What is important here is the teacher's insistence on the children maintaining long periods of passive inactivity, on threat of punishment.

being noisy was a sustained activity, as the examples below, from Xolisa Guzula's field-notes indicate.⁷

Children are being noisy.

Nosiseko comes out of the kitchen and says: "Ndicela uthule. Ndicela uthule. Ndicela uthule (I am asking you to keep quiet please. I am asking you to keep quiet please. I am asking you to keep quiet please).

Paula writes on the table.

Thuli: Ndizakuxela ubhala itafile (I am going to report you. You are writing on the table)

Boy: Niyangxola (You are making a noise).

Nosiseko: Ndizothatha uswazi lam ndinibethe nonke niyangxola (I am going to take my stick and hit all of you, you are making a noise).

From the perspective of literacy as situated social practice it is not a trivial observation that children encountered reading and writing at the Centre against the framing background of such strongly asserted disciplinary procedures. If one understands the class as an activity system where cognitive procedures and dispositions towards learning and literacy are situated in particular forms of social activity and interpersonal communication, one will recognize how the regulative procedures and the encounters with print, illustration and other communicative modalities are folded into each other inseparably. What we observed in the Sivile classrooms was children absorbing particular contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1972) from the teachers as to what school activity is about. They thus learnt to operate within the restricted parameters that are so taught. The following interaction illustrates further the point as to how orientations to reading and writing are confounded with the regulative practices of the teachers.

Nosiseko: Khanize apha phandle. Odwa, Thando, khang nindinike umaphepha enu. Aba ndibabizayo khang bandimike amaphepha abo (Come here outside. Odwa, Thando you did not give me your papers. The children I am calling out are those who did not give me their papers).

She hits Khalapha "Anuva, uyonqena, yintoni le uyibhale apha?" (You don't listen, you are lazy, what have you written here?) She hits him again. "Uyalova wena esikolweni.

⁷During research visits at this centre, I too heard "Thula! Lala!" (Be quiet! Sleep!) repeated by teachers frequently.

Ndizakubabetha aba bantu batya ipen. Bazakufa eyonanto." (You are behind at school. I am going to hit those of you who eat pens. The thing is they are going to die).

And again,

Children are already eating porridge. Sindiwe is serving seconds to the children. Nosiseko says "Andifuni mntwana ongxolayo namhlanje. Ndiza kubabetha aba bantwana (I don't want any child who's going to make a noise today. I'm going to hit these children).

Nosiseko: Bantwana, bangaphi abathi abazukungxola. Mabaphakamise isandla. (Children, how many of you say they are not going to make noise? They must raise their hands). Mabalale bona ndiyazazi mna ukuba ndizakubapha ntoni. Uzakubonakala ngokungalali umntu ongxolayo. (They must sleep/rest I know what I'm going to give them. A noise maker will be seen by not sleeping/resting).

Thuli raises her hand to show that she is not going to make noise. Children sleep/rest.

The teachers on one occasion showed some concern that they were being recorded during these exchanges, suggesting that they were aware that they were doing something that might be thought of as being wrong, showing their awareness of alternative models of teaching, which they had indeed been exposed to when attending Early Learning Research Unit (ELRU) courses.

Sindiwe: Lala. Yhe Xolisa asiphumi kulento yakho xa simane sisithi lala! (Hey Xolisa aren't we being recorded on your thing (the tape recorder) when we say sleep).

Xolisa: Nizakuphuma (you are being recorded)

The children were often required to sit quietly when the teachers were out of the room, preparing food or talking to each other. Teachers would appear at the sound of noise.

Nosiseko comes back with a stick, stands at the door and asks, "niyayibona le nto." (Do you see this)? Faka isitulo sakho. (Push your chair in). Niyayibona le nto? (Do you see this)? Sihle hambohlala esitulweni sakho. (Sihle hambohlala esitulweni sakho (Sihle go and sit in your chair). Niyayibona le nto)?

Children: Ewe misi (yes teacher)

Nosiseko: Yilento yenza ukuba nithule. (This is the thing that makes you quiet). Ngoku soze ndingakwazi ukunibetha (Now I won't be able to hit you). Ngoku ndizakunika amaphepha nibhale. (Now I'm going to give you papers to write). Paula hlala endaweni yakho.

Thuli: Nizobhala amarhoqololo (You are going to write squiggles).

Wonke umntu ulifumene iphepha phaya? (Did everyone get the paper over there)?

Children: Yes misi (yes teacher)

Nosiseko: Asibhali kwicala elinamagama (we don't write on the side with words). Nkwenkwe sukubhala ngapha bhala ngapha. (Nkwenkwe don't write on this side write on this side).

Mamela ke ngoku (now listen), (she hits the door with a stick) bhalani umntu angabhali iphepha lomnye umntu. (Write a person mustn't write on the other child's paper). Uba niyangxola andinithandi ukuba aningxoli ndiyanithanda (I don't love you when you make noise I love you when you don't make noise.)

It is worth noting that it was not all quiet and discipline throughout the day, and the children also got space to sing and dance. In the exchange that followed a teacher was teaching the children how to dance, while the other teachers were absent. There were two groups of dancers dancing to different songs both of them *kwaito* (local hip-hop) songs that were familiar from radio play.

Oh ho ho ho city Jehova

It's a fiasco

Pap parapapam

Come on every body

It's a fiasco

However, it is significant that all occasions that included exercises and activities of reading and writing were framed by the coercive disciplinary procedures that have been described above. Thus the social practices that framed these early childhood literacy events literacy were encounters with strict and sometimes painful disciplining of attention and bodies. Such examples of physical punishment and enforced passivity are not untypical of many pre-school and schooling contexts in South Africa that CELL researchers encountered in their research and similar accounts were reported from other researchers and teachers (Prinsloo and Stein, 2003).

Corporal punishment is illegal in South African schools but undoubtedly still occurs with frequency in many schools, where teachers sometimes defend it as being “part of our culture”. In such contexts, literacy and imposed passivity through the assertion of control by often painful

punishment become linked in children's imaginations, setting limits around what reading and writing mean in the school context.⁸

This case of Sivile Educare can also be seen as a stark example of a general point: The strategies and methods of teaching literacy to children in early schooling are simultaneously management techniques which are about managing the attention of children, regulating their behaviour and getting them to internalize norms. They are also simultaneously about getting young children to become students, or to be "ready-made and prepared children" as one teacher quoted earlier in this chapter described it. As they internalize such lessons about regulation and behaviour children collude to produce the activities which get labelled as early literacy learning.

Particular classroom practices, such as the chant learning described in the first example, but also most of the common strategies of early literacy teaching, such as the skilling and drilling of phonics and other list-learning are examples of the interweaving of pedagogy with management strategies, that are as much about regulating a group of small children as they are about literacy teaching. What are thought to be the most productive strategies for teaching children to read and write are confounded with questions of regulation of children and structuring of production and authority within the institution of schooling. As a result, the literacy of 'literacy lessons' is a particular kind of literacy, only tenuously linked to reading and writing practices outside of school, or to the later requirements of reading and writing in school, where such reading and writing is situated, activity-specific and genre-specific. Children learn about what reading and writing mean in the specific context of school, inseparable from the social relations and dispositions that develop within that domain. They encounter reading and writing as particular, school-based practices linked to certain kinds of performance and behaviours. An important point in relation to my overall argument in this study is that the ethnographic study of literacy as situated social practice makes it possible to uncover these crucial dynamics.

⁸ . Henderson's research amongst children in the shack settlement of Crossroads, Cape Town, described "a world articulated by violence across private and public spheres of social interaction" (Henderson, 1999, 27).

Learner-centredness and literacy learning

The third pre-school the CELL project focused on in Khayelitsha I will call the Paul Ferreira Early learning Centre, named after a man who left money in his will to be used for pre-schooling in needy areas, and managed by Catholic Welfare Development of the Catholic church. The school provides an interesting contrast with the learning centres already described, in that there was a much stronger commitment amongst the staff to the interactive and child-centred teaching strategies taught by ELRU and other progressive agencies. However, the same concerns I have raised about Sivile Preschool regarding the regulation of children's attention is visible at Paul Ferreira, where a related, limited and problematic version of what counts as school knowledge and school literacy was being communicated to children. This was because of the ways of reading and writing were embedded in particular forms of sense-making. There were nearly one hundred children attending the Centre. There were six teachers, one caretaker, and ninety-seven children. The Centre, like many others in the area, combined crèche and pre-school activities. The fees were R100 a month per child, which included the cost of the food that the children ate at the Centre. While the pre-school was open to anyone in the area, all the children were Black children of Xhosa-speaking origin, other than five Coloured children. The centre recruited its children from Mandalay, Tembani, Bongweni, Luzuko Park and other parts of Khayelitsha. The Centre also got children from the shack (or 'informal settlement') areas of New Rest and Lower Crossroads (just behind Mandalay). These children walked to the centre. Jill Daniels, a Coloured woman in her forties, had been the principal ever since the centre opened in 1997 with seventeen children. She said she belonged to the Mitchells Plain Principals Educare forum. Four other pre-schools in Mandalay belonged to the forum, and these five schools worked closely with each other, sharing resources when possible. These details indicate that this centre was closer to the educational mainstream than the previous two, in its institutional and pedagogic orientations, while working with children from similar social backgrounds to those at Sivile and Thembani. Of the nearly one hundred children attending the Centre at the time when this data was collected, two children were Afrikaans-speakers at home. The rest spoke Xhosa and some English, though all the parents were first-language Xhosa-speakers. The children were commonly encouraged to speak English and, as Jill told the researchers, were frequently spoken to in English by their parents because their parents identified 'good English' as being vital for their children's success at

school and thereafter. They wanted the teachers at the Centre to teach their children in English because they hoped to send them later to multiracial English-language schools whose reputations for success are much higher than local township schools. Knowing English makes it easier for the children to cope at those schools. Jill, who spoke only English and Afrikaans but was learning Xhosa said that some of the children picked English up very quickly. Teachers were also learning Xhosa from one of the teachers but they didn't know a lot.

That the teachers did not speak most of the children's first language probably contributed to the way they taught. The teaching involved developing a largely internal language and reference system. There was a system of meaning-making and meaning development, but this was an insulated system, with almost no connections with the frameworks of meaning-making that children brought to the school. The attachment of meaning to signs and objects was often in idiosyncratic ways that the teacher assigned as correct, and the children absorbed the rules as best they could.

This is illustrated in the exchange below, around a lesson on rabbits.

Rabbits are white (or red) and eat carrots (or jam)

Teacher Jill separates a class of 14 children from the other children. Jill asks the children to clap hands. The children clap.

Jill shows a picture of a rabbit (above the picture is written *my pet*). She asks the children what it is a picture of. The children say, a rabbit.

Jill asks them to repeat.

The children repeat, a rabbit.

Jill asks the children what kind of food the rabbit eats.

Some children shout, "pear!"

Jill says a rabbit eats carrots.

Jill shows them a rabbit from a book that hasn't been coloured in and asks what colour it is. The children are silent.

Jill tells them that a rabbit is white. (She tells the children that they are going to make a garden for their rabbit. It is going to live in the garden.)

Jill hands out pieces of blue cardboard with a rabbit drawn in black. She gives them scissors to cut the rabbits from the cardboard. Jill gives them wax crayons to colour in.

Four adult visitors come in. Jill takes two rabbits from the desk and a book, goes to the children and calls them to sit down. She shows them a rabbit and asks them what it is.

Children shout in unison, rabbit!

Jill asks the children why the rabbit has big eyes.

Loyiso says: to see.

Jill : Rabbit can be in what colour?

Children : White.

Jill : Or?

Children : White or red.

Jill tells children that the two small legs of the rabbit are used to scratch out the carrots.

Jill : Who knows a lion?

Children: Me.

Jill: The lion eats the rabbit and the rabbit eats carrots.

A rabbit hops with two small legs, to run away from the lions.

Jill reads from the book:

Bunny's mommy, Rabbit, wants Jam.

Jill asks: she wants what?

Children: Jam.

Jill: The mommy gives Bunny money.

Jill : What is Bunny going to do at the shop?

Children : To buy jam.

Jill : Who gave Bunny money?

Children : His mom.

Jill pages through the book (rather fast) and shows them that Bunny goes to the shop, comes back home.

The above presents an example of how teachers sometimes set up school knowledge as insulated, impermeable, and disconnected from children's emergent meaning-making, language and literacy resources. Firstly, although Jill was working with mostly Xhosa-language children, their substantial language and out-of-school knowledge was excluded because it was quite foreign to her. (Jill had never heard the dramatic Xhosa-language song about the rabbit - 'Unogwaja' and 'Jonny Kabani' - which I documented in my discussion above of Thembani Pre-school, so she could not draw on it in her teaching presented here.)

Secondly, Jill had selected to tell the children what she understood counted as school knowledge. It was not common-sense knowledge, particularly for the kinds of children in Jill's class. Despite the children's experiential evidence to the contrary, Jill explained that, in this schoolroom setting, rabbits were white and ate carrots. But this construct of situated meaning was not internally consistent: although the children learnt to use these particular situated meanings of rabbit - white, eats carrots - this knowledge was not consistently maintained or reinforced by the teacher. When visitors arrived soon after and Jill asked the children what colour rabbits were, they all said 'white' but the teacher asked for more 'And?' upon which the children threw in the colour 'red', which they perhaps thought was as likely as any colour in this arbitrary social semiotic world, and they had indeed used red crayons to colour in the picture. When Jill read from the rabbit book, she subverted her earlier dogma around rabbits' diet. Having said that they eat carrots, she read the story where rabbit's mom buys jam, without noticing the contradiction with her earlier statement about rabbits' diet. By uncritically and seemingly unthinkingly working with the story in the book, a story that worked with a different, situated meaning and set of conventions around rabbits to the one that Jill had already endorsed, Jill had moved, without signaling a different frame of activity, from a world of classroom rabbits to a convention in much of children's literature where animals are anthropomorphic. They do people things, wear clothes, talk, go to the shop and eat jam. Jill had herself so absorbed the logic of this device that she failed to notice the need to explain that rabbit now meant something else, in a differently situated set of practices, and was differently articulated in an alternative system of meaning-making from the rabbit that was white and ate carrots. For children who had learnt this convention about animals as people in children's books, this shift would be less confusing. For the many children in the class for whom such storybook reading was not part of the early literacy experience, the likelihood of confusion was much greater.

While Jill did not resort to the physical violence of the teachers at Sivile Preschool we see that she nonetheless directed them into narrow and probably damaging learning strategies. Through her management of questions and responses she communicated to the children that the appropriate strategy for learning and communicating under these conditions was to identify worthwhile knowledge as only what the teacher wanted to receive by way of response to her questions.

The discussion of the above lesson illustrates the challenge, for children learning about reading and writing in school settings, to make sense of and apply the particular situated meanings that they are presented in school. The meanings of apparently simple concepts like ‘rabbit’ reside in the cultural models of particular kinds of people, their practices and their settings. Children need to encounter school-based meanings in coherently structured ways so that they can add them to their repertoire. This applies to story-book conceptualizations of rabbit as much as it does to scientific concepts such as the way light travels, or the way comparative descriptions have effect in the English language.

The study of early childhood literacy as situated social practice

The three pre-schools which featured in the above discussion are examples of low budget ‘educare’ and pre-school centres that operate with very limited public funding, professional training and support in the urban townships around South Africa. The children across these three schools came from very similar backgrounds as regards socio-economic status, linguistic and cultural background, so the noticeable variations that I described across the sites were not a function of the differences that children brought to these institutions. However, the children at each site were undoubtedly taking somewhat different orientations to literacy and meaning-making resources away with them into the first years of schooling. The differences were a result of the way the teachers at each site invented their activity differently, despite following the same broad curricula of knowledge of the alphabet, nursery rhymes and ‘how to listen’. They all produced and applied novel and localised versions of pedagogical orientations to the teaching of reading and writing. Engeström (1999, 28) drawing on Vygotsky’s (1978, 1962) work described how any local activity resorts to “some historically formed mediating artefacts, cultural resources that are common to the society at large... These resources can be combined, used, and transformed in novel ways in local joint activity. Local, concrete activities, therefore, are simultaneously unique and general”. These teachers all gave a particular interpretation to the general resources of the theories and understanding of how children develop to be readers and writers but sustained a shared local practical commitment to such interpretations at each of the centres, so that a particular activity or practice could be identified and described as broadly characteristic at each of the pre-schools.

The teachers engaged with literacy pedagogy and mediated reading and writing practices in ways that would have consequences for the kinds of readers and writers these children might become, both within school environments, and as independent readers outside of school. In the first example, classroom practice drew on out-of-school resources of rhyme, narrative and performance, from local cultural and religious sources. The focus of the mediation activities was on recitation and repetition of teacher-led/initiated songs and hymns, with no attention to children's production or reflection on meaning-making. In the second case, a connection was communicated between literacy, discipline and punishment. In the third case, the teacher introduced the children to mainstream academic literacy through story reading and question and answer interchange, but the practices lacked coherence and there was little opportunity offered for children to draw on their out-of-school resources for making sense of the school-based practices. In each case the children were encouraged to internalize patterns and rules about what reading and writing practices are in school settings, and how to respond to cues in that regard.

I have applied a social practices approach to study the literacy practices that were characteristic of three pre-schools in Khayelitsha. The conceptual and methodological resources of this approach to the study of literacy guided attention to the details of how particular groups of children were encountering reading and writing against the background of practices that produced particular configurations of sign-making and other practices. I drew attention to the institutionally-based specificity of these practices; their variability across institutions who were working with children from a broadly comparable socio-economic and linguistic background. However, with reference to the literature reviewed at the beginning of this chapter, I was not able to address the question of children as active learners and meaning makers that was raised in the post-Piagetian literature that I examined (Bomer, 2003; Clay, 1996; 1979; Crawford, 1995; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Goodman, 1986; Goodman 1984; Hall, Larson and Marsh, 2003; Read, 1971; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). The reason for this was clearly that in each case there was no space at all, or very little, for interactivity and for child-initiated exchanges.

In the next chapter I study examples of children's play activity, and develop a contrasting analysis with the school-based studies above. I show what attention to children's active meaning making practices brings to the study of early childhood literacy, that is not visible in these studies of institutional practices in early literacy classes. I conclude by summarizing how the social practices orientation I have applied and developed has been productive in these applications to

the study of early childhood literacy, and what this work has contributed to my elaboration of a social practices perspective on literacy.

It is interesting to note that, even though it is a Catholic school, the pupils are only 35% Catholic. Table 2.1 below shows the distribution of different Christian denominations and religions in School 1. The number of Catholics in the secondary school alone is not known.

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Table 2.1: School 1 Religious affiliation

	Students		Teaching Staff	
	No.	%	No.	%
Catholic	185	35.0	18	39.1
Other Christian faith	202	38.3	19	41.3
Other faith	59	11.2	1	2.2
Unknown	82	15.5	8	17.4
TOTAL	528	100	46	100

(Source: the School Principal)

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For extramural activities, the school offers a wide range of sporting facilities from soccer and netball to cricket, swimming and squash. The cultural activities include choir, debating societies as well as private group tuition in ballet, drama, judo and karate. The school offers a rich music curriculum and private lessons in a variety of different instruments. In addition, the school organises adventure courses and leadership training, and “on the more serious side, help with issues like conflict resolution” (School leaflet, 2004). Furthermore, the school is involved in an outreach programme. The students are encouraged to help the needy.

The religious nature of the school is evident in the sense that the first thing one sees from the entrance of the gate is an attractive chapel. The chapel is the central focus of the life of the school and all the students irrespective of their religion go to the chapel every morning for prayers. The school holds various Masses on first Fridays, feast days and beginning and end of each term, and Communion service on every Friday. It also displays numerous symbolic images throughout the school, including statues and a crucifix in every room. The school is described as Christ- centred. The spirituality of the school is strengthened through religious education lessons, retreats, confessions and religious

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Further application of the social practices approach to literacy in South Africa

(ii) The study of early childhood literacy

Chapter Seven: Children's meaning-making and semiotic play in informal contexts

In this chapter I examine how one group of children's play activity presented opportunities and experiences for them to engage in flexible, creative and productive signifying practices. I argue that a close examination of their activity shows them creating and modelling for each other a variety of flexible, situated ways of making and taking meaning from a range of language and other semiotic resources. Such a focus on children's active engagement in signifying and meaning making activity provides a contrast with the particular kinds of limited engagement with reading and writing that were described in the studies of the pre-schools in the previous chapter. Where the emphasis in the pre-school was on children's passive absorption of the signifying practices presented to them, the perspective I develop here is that children's social participation in meaning making is not simply a unidirectional movement in which they gradually take on board an already available social world. Within constraints, and given the space, children at least partly follow their own interests and experiences as they choose what they want to represent and choose the modes, means and materials for their representative work. In doing so they work with available social resources, and with the values and status that these resources and signs hold in that setting.

A social practices orientation to learning, as I develop and apply it here, sees learning as active and as practice-based; that is, as socially situated, and distributed across people, artefacts and categories, in contexts of activity. In this view, reading and writing are one part of children's social activity. Literacy is embedded in children's social and practical lives. In common with the 'whole language' and 'emergent literacy' theoretical perspectives that I reviewed early in the last chapter, a social practices account stretches the process of literacy development back into early childhood; into a variety of activities, such as children's play, drawing, pretend and invented reading and -writing, and parental, sibling and teacher modelling of particular ways of making and taking meaning in relation to print and other forms of sign-based communication.

Children play

A productive focus on children's play activities has followed from the understanding of children as active meaning-makers in the practices of reading and writing. Play offers a space for children to create imaginary situations where they can reshape concrete objects, actions, and indeed, their own voices. They can infuse their own intentions and meanings into those objects and actions (Dyson, 1997a). Children often replace the rules of ordinary life with precise, sometimes arbitrary and often unexceptional rules of their own that govern the correct playing of the game. Vygotsky (1978) regarded symbolic play as an important venue where children could develop their sign-making resources. Play provides opportunity for children to draw on texts, images, movement and semiotically imbued artefacts from their multiple social worlds of home, school and peer interaction (Dyson, 1993) to create their own intertextual meanings.

Kress has usefully addressed differences between adults and children as to how they encounter, learn and use literacy (Kress, 2003). He suggested that the process of meaning-making is the same for adults as it is for children, in that they both use what is available and which seems most suited to make the meanings that they are interested to make. However, he argued that children encounter literacy differently to adults in some key respects: In social settings where literacy is around and part of everyday life, children don't necessarily attach the same status and importance to print literacy as adults do. Where adults are oriented towards what is 'correct', children are less constrained, Kress (2003) suggests, partly because they are less informed than adults, but also because they are more willing to work inventively with what is at hand, and to explore the signifying potentials of a range of resources and materials. Whereas adults' orientation reflects the particular common sense of their societies, children are concerned to understand the nature of their worlds and to engage with them, to examine what their place is and might become. Where adults see a ready-made path towards meaning-making, children make their meanings by drawing on available resources "governed by their *interest* at the moment of making the sign" (Kress, 2003, 155). Children's interest, which is undoubtedly socially shaped as well, works to guide their selection of what they want to represent, and which aspects they use to operate as signs (e.g., circles drawn by a pre-school child to signify a car indicate the selection of the wheels and the steering wheel as emblematic for that child). For adults language, and language as writing, are the most highly valued available resources. To children anything at hand is apt as a sign-making and meaning-making resource – whether it be a stick, which readily becomes a horse (Vygotsky, 1978), a

cardboard box which becomes a warriors helmet, a blanket and chairs which become a house (Kress, 1997) or an old pantyhose which the children call a 'wait' becomes a barrier rope, a key resource in an elaborate game activity, as I describe below.

The nature of childhood, childhood play and the influences of adult norms upon children need also to be understood as culturally and socially variable practices, where parents and social groups have different attitudes and responses to children's self-directed activities. The social practices approach to the study of literacy draws attention to the reality that children and parents live in home settings where time and space are conceptualised and regulated differently, where routines are differently organized, where attitudes to children's play and literacy activities vary (Heath, 1983).

Making sense in Khwezi Park

My analysis in this chapter focuses on one child, in interaction with her peers in a play context.¹ The child, Masibulele, was seven years old when the data were collected, in her first year of schooling. She lived in Khwezi Park Township, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, and attended a local school where she was learning to read and write in Xhosa, her home-language. She would later learn to read and write English, which will most likely become the predominant language of learning for her.

Both Masibulele's parents grew up in the Transkei Bantustan. Masibulele's mother left school before finishing 'Primary Schooling'. Her father left school during his first year of 'High School' (after six years of schooling) to go and work on the gold mines in Gauteng. By the time we met Masibulele he was currently working on the railways. Masibulele's mother did not have a job, but ran the household and took primary care of Masibulele and her older sister, Ntombephelo. Masibulele was doing well at her school and liked to draw and write, but there were almost no books or paper in her home. Her interactions with her parents were not characterized by those 'scaffolding behaviours', once thought to be near universal but now seen as mostly a Western middle class practice (Hasan, 2002): i.e., her mother did not regularly engage her as a conversational partner, where the conversation starts at baby-talk level and gets increasingly 'normal' as the child matures. Nor did her mother try to prepare her for the interactive patterns of communication that are said to characterize the discourse of

¹ The research was carried out as part of the CELL research project. The data was collected by Xolisa Gazula, working as a research assistant on the CELL project. She spent several hours on a few days of every week for six months in the company of Masibulele, in her home, at school and with her friends in play settings. My study here, done for purposes of this thesis, also contributes to the larger CELL study.

teacher-pupils, such as those of question, answer, feedback, or Initiation, Response, Evaluation (Heath, 1983).

Masibulele was in the 'strong group' in her streamed classroom and was often sent to assist children in the two 'weak groups': they contained around half the children; those who were just not 'getting it' when it came to the 'basics of reading and who exasperated their teacher. Masibulele played daily with other Xhosa-speaking children in her neighbourhood, in a group varying between 8 and 16 children at a time, of varying ages, mostly girls, but the group often also included one or two boys. Their play was characterized by a mix of languages, narrative resources, images and artefacts from local popular culture (including 'traditional' Xhosa and Christian church influences), from the mass media (TV and radio) and school.

The data I focus on here relate to the children's interaction during two particular, overlapping games, 'rounders' and 'wait', both versions of ball-tag and skipping games. They share much in common with similar games played by children elsewhere in the world, and draw on the names and practices of such games from elsewhere. But the local versions of these games were substantially redesigned and elaborated on by the children studied. The Khwezi Park versions that Masibulele and her friends played allowed for substantial spoken, sung and danced displays at various stages. In between throws, and particularly when the ball was not fielded cleanly the children in the middle had license to tease and show-off. This aspect of the game was signalled by them as '*steji*' or 'stage'. It is apparent that much of the fun of the game came from the space for verbal exchange, jousting, experiment, play and display that the game made possible, but the rules for playing were followed and continuously policed in verbal exchanges. In the *wait* game one of the children, by saying the Afrikaans word '*praat*' (speak; talk), could nominate a particular chant routine to be followed while crossing the rope (made from old twisted panty-hose), when the children had to call out the name of a colour, in English, at the conclusion of each stage. The height of the ropes to be crossed could also be set by the participants, as a further variation, at ankle-, knee- or waist-height. In my discussion of the play below I present the transcript first and then go on to discuss it. I refer to line numbers in my discussion. The mark // indicates there has been a deletion in the transcript. Upper case indicates shouting. The numbering of lines is for purposes of easy reference in the discussion.

1. Masibulele: Masidlaleni ounders maan (Let's play rounders man)
2. Masibulele and Thandeka (in unison) STEJI! (STAGE!)
3. Masibulele: STEJI! Thetha thetha ngubani onothix'omkhulu emhlabeni?
(STAGE! Speak speak who's got a big God on earth?) (*they laugh*)

4. Child: Hay'aba! (No you!)

Masibulele and Thandeka shouted out 'Stage!' (lines 2 and 3) at the initiation of the game, bidding to be the person in the middle who dodges the ball and is "on stage" in that she has a license to perform, heckle, tease the others as they try to get her 'out' by throwing the ball to hit her. Masibulele's elaborate use of a religious saying (line 3) regarding who gets chosen won her a laugh from the other children as well as a successful bid to be in the middle - on stage. The humour lies at least partly in its mildly transgressive quality, a surprising and hyperbolic religious reference in a peer play setting, and the humorous intervention signaled her competitive intention to perform and tease. She continued, having been given the stage:

5. Masibulele: Ndinezitayile ngoku. Ndigcwele zizitayile (*she sings*) Isqendu sam nesikaNtombephelo. Esi sesikaNtombephelo. Esi sesam
6. (I've got style now. I'm full of styles.) (*she sings*) (My piece) (*short skirt or shorts*) (and Ntombephelo's. This one is Ntombephelo's and this is mine.) (*referring to her skirt and top*)

Children in the middle were encouraged to strut, sing, tease and call attention to their bodily selves and their social selves in a kind of interactive display that usually elicited comment from their friends. Masibulele, in line 5 above drew attention to her clothes and to her relationship with Ntombephelo, her eleven year old sister who was also in the game and was an important influence on Masibulele's sense of herself, her confidence, her access to valuable information and what her development trajectory might be. She was thus marking here this relationship. At the same time she was engaged in embodied sign-making practices where her physical and social selves were resources for meaning-making and social interaction. She then moved on to a different kind of teasing display, involving numbers and a subversive intervention in the game, where her emerging literacy (to do with numbers and their social uses) is apparent:

7. Thandeka: Ukhona u one out? Ukhona u one out? (Is there one out? Is there one out?)
8. Masibulele: Ewe, no five out, no six out, no seven out no twenty out. (Yes, and five out, and six out and seven out and twenty out)
9. Girl: Hayi, u one out ukhona? (No, is one out there?)
10. Masibulele: Ukhona ewe. Uyophela ku twenty-four. Ha, a out. Uyophela ku twenty eight thousand out. (Yes it's there. Up until twenty four. Ha, a out. Up until twenty eight thousand out.)

Masibulele can be seen here to be making use of her license on stage to be humorously subversive of the others efforts to monitor the game. While the others were trying to find out if anyone had gone 'out', she turned this into an exaggerated display of numbering. In her first year of school at that time she almost certainly had no precise idea of 28,000 but she clearly enjoyed invoking big numbers.

She did something similarly exuberant and playful soon after this episode, again with numbers, and inviting response from the others:

11. Masibulele: Irighi lo nto. Kaloku mna ndimdala ndingange one hundred and million dollar. (That thing is right. By the way I am as old as one hundred and million dollar.)
12. Thandeka: Kodwa umfutshane kangaka kodwa ungame one hundred and million dollar. (But you are this short but you say you are as big as one hundred and million dollar.)
13. Ntombephelo: Ngekudala wasweleka. (You would have died a long time ago.)

Notably Masibulele used the word dollar rather than South African currency (rand), perhaps because of its force as a non-local sign of value, or magnitude, but also perhaps because it marked the freedom to experiment that she had in this part of the game. The responses from the other girls (lines 6 and 7) joined in the playful spirit of the odd metaphor, not questioning its literal appropriateness in correlating amounts of age, size and money. This distributed cognitive playfulness around unconventional signs shows the children feeding off each other's sign-making.

Kress (1997) examined the emerging sign-making practices of pre-school children. He presented a similar example of original sign-making through metaphor, where a child out on a walk described a hill as 'heavy', a sign that worked for the child because of the correlation with the effort required to walk up the hill. Kress used that example to illustrate his point about meaning-making as being an *internal* sign-making process, where meanings are made by children drawing on their own repertoire of interest, experience and semiotic resources. Such resources do not resemble the conventional standardized forms of descriptive analogy that become the internalized versions used in later life. Kress also made the argument, important for my purposes here, that children happily combine various semiotic systems, such as talk, drawing, gesture, dramatic play and writing. He described "multimodality" as "an absolute fact of children's semiotic practices" (Kress, 1997, 137).

The point to note here is that the game allowed the children to engage in such playful and productive exercising of their meaning-making resources, in a communicative context that was permitting of fantasy and experiment, with peer feedback and also with boundaries and rules. The children interactively and reactively shared notions of value and status with each other and explored how these were embedded in language and routines.

Playing by the rules

The following extract is an example of intensive game playing. I relate it in order to show how the children, absorbed in the activity, are engaged in several tasks, including the management of social interaction and relationships and the maintenance and modification of rules of play. Their semiotic activity is seen to be multi-lingual in its resources, referenced to multiple other social contexts, and multi-modal in its blend of kinetic movement, dance, language and gesture. The language is a 'social language' (Bakhtin 1981, Gee 1996): the meanings of words and movements of reference are internal to the social-semiotic domain of play that the children construct. The discourse practices are not those of reproducing inherited scripts or codes, but of situated production, which suggests a processual view of culture (Rosaldo 1993) or what Bourdieu called "regulated improvisation" (1977: 78). The meanings produced are only fully sensible to insiders, though the bits of language, as resources, come from outside of the play domain.

The frequent use of English (and some Afrikaans) terms in the game signals this process of taking 'status words' or 'fixed words' and using them as clear meaning markers. These words included *rounders*, *cross*, *wait*, *colours*, *statue*, *numbers*, *out*, *duck*, *partners*, *praat* (speak; Afrikaans), *rules*, *score*, as well as colours and numbers in English. Numbers were a useful form of division and pacing. Each number corresponded to a step in the children's dance across a rope. While the children were taught the numbers in isiXhosa at school, as well as the days of the week in the Xhosa language, they used the English words in everyday conversations, as did their parents. The numbers and colours below were said in English by the children.

1. Ntombephelo: Hayi ingatyekeleli sisi. Emakhwapheni ngoku. (No, it must not be soft sister. At the armpits now.)
2. Ntombephelo: Wait one chacha, One, two, one, two chacha.
3. Thandeka: Wait one chacha
4. Ntombephelo: Out, one, two, three, four, out, one, two, three, four, out, one, two, three, duck, one, two, three, four
5. Masibulele: Orange
6. Ntombephelo: Orange, one, two, three, four. Yhu praat (Hey talk!) (*Praat is an Afrikaans word meaning talk or speak.*)
7. Ntombephelo: One, two! one, two, three, four. One, two! one, two, three, four, one, two, one, two, three, four, White. one, two, three, four, black, two, three, four, orange.
8. Child: Yithi orange. (Say orange.)
9. Ntombephelo: Yhu praat! (Hey talk!). Yhu! Two, three, four, and two, three, four, and one, two, three, four.

10. Nomha: Irules! Ayikho inzikinane. (The rules! There's no nzikinane.) ("*Nzikinane*" is a cut under one of the toes, an analogical reference to the height at which the 'wait' is to be held).
11. Nomha: Esinqeni. (At the waist.) Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, out.
12. Thandeka: Ukhona u one out. (There is one out.)
13. Nomha: One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four, Yhu andidinwe! Bhekela Bhekela! (Hey, I'm tired! Move back move back!) One, two, three, four mustard, one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four. Asenzi praat. (We don't do *praat*.) Wait, wait, wait.
14. Mabhuti: Statue, Masibulele! Yiza ubulapha! (Statue, Masibulele! Come you were here!)
15. Masibulele: Skozi? (Score?)
16. N: Seven

The transcript cannot of course capture the blend of words, rhythm, gesture and movement that were involved here. Line 1 shows Masibulele's older sister doing some meta-work, making sure the rope was at the right height for this stage of the game and that tension on the rope was right. Her own turn at the formulaic dance-shuffle movement across the rope was enhanced by her turning it into a cha-cha. In line 4, Masibulele intervened by nominating a colour, but it was not her turn to do so. However her sister accepted the prompt and then remembered (signalled by 'Yhu!' in line 6) that she should have said the word *praat* (speak), which was the cue to nominate the names of colours at the end of each sequence. In line 8 she 'switched off' the nomination of colours by saying 'praat' again, and then continued her sequence of movements without any more colours. 'Statue' (line 14) was a cue to freeze on the spot without moving, borrowed from another game. In line 10 the child Nomha made an intervention about the rules, again invoking an insider language (*nzikinane*).

The predominance of English words in this, and very many of the other examples of play recorded in the CELL studies, is remarkable, and could be seen to reflect the dominance of English as a language of status and influence, the language of schooling and knowledge, the language of learning of older children in the group and the language of status in the mass (musical and visual) media and popular cultural resources that the children encounter. But it might also be that English, because of its relative separation from children's immediate, intimate life-world in their family settings, is also an exotic language that can be 'looted' more readily for children to construct their own meanings out of their own activities. An example is the term 'wait' and its uses in a language of the children's own. 'Wait' is what the children in the game do between moves. It signals a completion of a sequence or a pause, a marker somewhat like a comma or full stop on a page. The word 'wait' also signifies the

panty-hose ropes that are stretched out and have to be crossed in elaborate patterns of movement and chant, as well as the name of the game itself:

1. Thandeka: Yhu akemde uwait wakho ndimbone izolo.Yhu!. (Hey, your *wait* is very long. I saw it yesterday. Hey!)
2. Masibulele: Uqala pha kulapali aye kuphela ngapgha kwezilabs. (It starts at that pole and ends over at the slabs.)

This term also appears in informal peer talk at school:

1. Zenande (*talking to a friend in class*): Yhazi ndimlibele u wait wam ndimlibele ekhaya. (You know I have forgotten my *wait* at home.)

It is clear here that materials such as old panty hose are shaped to become over time, context-specific meaning-making resources for articulation purposes of a particular collective group. Equally apparent is that language is similarly shaped as a resource. These processes are linguistic, material and social, and indexical of social relationships. When Zenande talked to her friend about having left her *wait* at home, she was simultaneously signaling their collective belonging to a social and semiotic domain distinct from school and home.²

The children's collaborative production included their own development of an insider language, which was constantly under construction and elaboration. What they did cannot therefore said to be code-switching as such, that is, they were not simply moving from one language (in the big sense of language as being either Xhosa or English) to another. Rather they were speaking a social language of their own, parts of which might well appear to be code-switched, but not in such a way that meanings remained static. That linguistic elasticity is just one example of children's creative borrowings in this study.

Making meaning across social semiotic domains

The children in the study built situated meanings while playing, and learnt how to use these meanings in context. They also displayed a meta-awareness of how words take on different meanings across different social sites and semiotic domains. Thus Masibulele (see below), whose ability to use English was quite limited, turned the word 'cross', which was usually about crossing the rope in the game, into teasing a child, a switch that depends on the children understanding the double meaning of cross as in 'a cross teacher' or 'ma'am [is] cross':

1. Nompumeleo: Awucrossi! (You are not going to cross!)

² This domain is also one into which we, the researchers, and now the readers of this work are partially drawn, thus indicating that it is not a narrowly exclusive or exclusionary domain. It is thus unfortunate that adults are often not interested in children's 'play talk'. Teachers, in particular, can surely benefit from engagement with such children's creativity and flexibility.

2. Masibulele: Thandeka cross!
3. Masibulele: Dlala ma'am cross! Ma'am cross, ma'am cross! (Play ma'am cross! Ma'am cross, ma'am cross!)
4. Thandeka: Hayi ke uyabona ke Masibulele? (Hey, you see Masibulele?)
5. Zintle: U ma'am cross ngubani Masibulele? (Who's ma'am cross Masibulele?)
6. Masibulele: Nank'epheth'ibhola u ma'am cross. (Ma'am cross is the one holding the ball.)
7. Girl: Andingoma'am cross mna. (I am not ma'am cross.)

What these children brought from school was varied but particular: School was one site for their English-language development, so that many of the English terms they were trying out had a school-echo to them. The authority relations of school were also echoed in their play. The language drills of their schooling were reproduced as well, as in the example below. Masibulele had not yet learnt the routine below at school, so the following initiation of an episode around lists of 'comparative words' was unquestionably something learnt out of school, from her eleven-year old sister or an older friend, or during the game at some other time. Masibulele was 'on-stage' when she initiated this exchange around 'school English', starting off with a teasing display of another child and then moving on to a school-English display.

1. Masibulele: Anelisa unxibe la panty incinci. Leya wawuyinxibile. (Anelisa is wearing that small panty³. The one you wore.)
2. Anelisa: Hayi ke mna andinxibanga panty encinci. (No I am not wearing a small panty.)
3. Masibulele: Whowu whowu! (Wow! Wow!) Good! Good gooder goodest!
4. Ntombephelo: Fire firer firest!
5. Child: Good gooder goodest!
6. Ntombephelo: Fire firer firest!
7. Child: Long longer longest!
8. Ntombephelo: Leg lenger longest!
9. Child: Eye! (This child might have said 'I' rather than 'eye'. Either way, she doesn't get any further. 'Eye' would have linked with 'leg' in the previous example, and 'I' would link as a cue for 'girl' in the one that follows.)
10. Ntombephelo: Girl girler girlest!
11. Child: Bread breader breadest!

The children's playful interactive parodies of 'school grammar' speak for themselves at one level. They are deliberate and humorous, and to the outsider provide a comment on the limits of such decontextualized rule-teaching by rote. They show too how such play also involves

³ 'Panty' is an English South African substitute for the odd-sounding 'pair of panties'.

processes of scaffolding and apprenticeship learning, where older children model resources and attitudes to resources that give younger children access to these forms of meaning-making and identity processes.

Children's multiple social worlds

If we understand the children's social worlds of home, school and peer-play as distinctive but permeable, as does Dyson (1993), we can see them interactively using terms whose meanings adhere and shift across those domains.⁴ In the interaction below they play with shifts in meaning of 'cheating' in each location, in their play, at school and in 'home culture'.

1. Ntombephelo: Okay, wena uzoqhatha mna apha. (Okay, so you've come to cheat me here.)
2. Anelisa: Uqhatha uNtombephelo! (You cheat Ntombephelo!)
3. Ntombephelo: Uzosiqhatha elokishini! (You have come to cheat us in 'the location!')
4. Girl: Uyeka ukuyoqhatha esikolweni. (She doesn't go to cheat at school.)

'Cheating' in the game, 'in the location' and at school have distinct but related meanings; they each refer to different sets of relationships in social practice. Running them together like the children do here is a form of embedded, dialogical, meta-linguistic play with the shifts and relatedness of meanings across contexts. The Xhosa term *elokishini* (line 3) is a borrowing from the English *location*. The term 'location' was first used by Natal's 19th century colonial government and later by *apartheid* administrators to refer to segregated urban residential areas designated for Black South Africans. The Xhosa term has survived multiple substitutes for this term in English (*township* being the most contemporary term) and also survived the demise of formal *apartheid*. So the saying "you've come to cheat us in the location" captures the children's parents' perception of 'outsiders' coming into their socio-residential domain to exploit them, and signals a particular element of local identity that has been sustained despite the ending of *apartheid*-era segregation. 'Cheating' at school has a particular meaning, again, that is school-bound and is linked to the threat of strong sanction. 'Cheating' in the context of game playing is usually a term used in peer conflicts over control, direction of play and interpretation of rules, and of course doesn't carry the sense of transgression or threat of sanction that 'school cheating' carries. By invoking these three distinct domain-based meanings in a quick exchange of repartee, the children play with the situatedness and fluidity of sign-based meaning making.

⁴ Dyson's notion of distinct but permeable worlds is an analyst's distinction, and there is a question as to whether the children saw these worlds as distinctive, or as one, with multiple meanings to it. In my own analysis I follow Dyson, but with some hesitancy.

Dyson (1993, 133) identified a problem that inexperienced readers have in relation to the situatedness of meaning in text: “their difficulties lie not in the words but in understanding something that lies behind the words, embedded in the sense”. She suggested that the dialogue between ‘composers’ and ‘addressees’ occurs “against a backdrop of other voices – already uttered texts – without which the composers’ own voices cannot be heard. The concept of intertextuality that Dyson, drawing on Bakhtin (1981) invoked here, and others studies use (Lemke, 1997; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 1999; Snyder and Beavis, 2003) makes the point that when we make or take meaning we do so by drawing on other texts or images we have read, heard or seen. These examples of children’s dialogue shows children playing with and across intertextual resources.

Snow (1991) identified the facilitation of language and literacy acquisition in middle-class families in the USA as involving *semantic contingency* with adult speech and literacy. She argued that such semantic inputs from adults as expansions, semantic extensions, clarifying questions and answers to questions, scaffolded children’s entry into school, writing-based communicative practices. Snow suggested that certain metalinguistic strategies are only available through adult ‘scaffolding’ provided for children to learn (Snow, 1990, 226) but I would suggest that what we can see here, in children’s creativity and linguistic playfulness, is that they are able to undertake and share with each other, without any such extensively provided adult scaffolding, at least some of the metalinguistic activities (involving reflection upon language) that are commonly thought to be not available to them.

'Local' resources for meaning-making

The CELL research also demonstrated that Xhosa home-language resources provided the children with further rich sources for image, metaphor, rhythm and meaning-making, all of which surfaced unpredictably during play, as the following sample quotes from diverse moments of play illustrate:

1. Masibulele: (to Thandeka) Statue! Awuvingcele endlwini yeempuku. (Closed in a rat's house.) (*idiomatic, suggesting close confinement*) Rayi rayi ndinanto yam jikelele ngqu. (I have something that goes around.)
2. Masibulele: Yatsho indoda endala. Yhu awumde ingathi usisikhonkwane esingabethelelwanga.) (Hey, you are tall like a nail that hasn't been hammered in.)
3. Masibulele: Uqale wabaphamanzi. Ubaph'isonka kushota ubaphe umngqusho uphinde ubathengele izihlangu. (*Chant*) (You first gave them water. Then you

gave them bread. You need to give them *samp* (corn) and buy them shoes.)

4. Ntombephelo: Bendithe nqa umam'umpumputhela angathethi! (I was wondering why the blind mother didn't talk.) (*She is being sarcastic, implying that Masibulele is normally very talkative.*)
5. Zintle: Hayi hayi hayi akho sesikolweni apha! (No no no, we are not at school here!) (*Zintle's response to Ntombephelo is an indication that for her sarcasm is a school/teacher resource which is best left there.*)
6. Ntombephelo: Ndizakuniqwayita nina! (I'm going to keep you out of play for a long time) (*qwayita (mqwayito) is a reference to biltong, which is meat that has been dried for a long time. Her meaning is: 'I'm going to be in the middle for long enough to make dried meat.'*)
7. Masibulele: (To Thandeka) Iphi ibhola? Yhe smathamatha somntwana iphi ibhola x3. (Where's the ball? Hey you sleepy child where's the ball) (x3)

Various metaphorical and connotative resources of the Xhosa language were deployed in the various examples above and, as they show, this productive work was constantly responded to by other children. The rich intertextual resources that were drawn on above carry meanings and echoes for the various children using them. In the last example, Masibulele apparently enjoying the rhythm and melody of the utterance ('smathamatha somntwana' has a rhythmic quality in spoken isiXhosa) turned it into a repeated chant.

Language and musicality

Another finding of the CELL research was that music of various sorts featured in the children's play, as might have been expected. Popular and church music were favourite resources. The pop music that the children drew on showed them connecting with a wider youth culture, including local rap (*kwaito*) music, international pop songs and 'hit-parade' music, and church music including Xhosa and English hymns. The following musical and spoken dialogue is illustrative of the children's playful interactive work around names and sounds.

1. Masibulele sings: "Say my name, say my name, igama lam nguNtosh. (My name is Ntosh.) (*This is from a local rap or kwaito song which mixes languages.*)
2. Masibulele sings: Elinye igama lam ndingu Sibukanye undibize Bulele. (My other name is Sibukanye or you can call me Bulele.)
3. Thandeka sings: My name is Thandeka. I live in Khayelitsha.
4. Masibulele sings: I believe I can fly. I believe I can touch the sky. (pop song)

Masibulele's decomposing of her name into syllables displayed an often identified skill with regard to school literacy learning, where an awareness of discrete sounds of the language

(phonological awareness) is treated by some researchers as an early skill required for successful literacy learning (Garton and Pratt, 1998). The data on children's play unsurprisingly has many such examples of children's delight in music and rhyme. Such attention to the regularities and musicality of language are commonly seen as important resources for developing children's sense of phonological awareness. Yet children's independent play is not often recognized as an important venue for such learning activity.

Teale and Sulzby (1991) claimed that we can look at *metalinguistic awareness*, or the ability to reflect on language as happening on four levels: phonemic⁵ awareness, word awareness, form awareness, and pragmatic awareness. They suggested that "all levels of linguistic awareness are necessary in becoming literate" (Teale and Sulzby, 1991, 745). I have shown in analysis of the various examples above that the children in this study were constructing precursory practice at these levels (which are analytical levels, after all, and can and do happen simultaneously in practice) in their play.

A social practices perspective on early childhood literacy learning

Over the last two chapters I applied a social practices orientation to the study of aspects of early childhood literacy. I focused on two themes, those of children's play and of literacy learning at pre-school centres, and treated them as sites of children's early literacy development and as sites of emergent literacy.

I showed in the study of early literacy classrooms as collective sites of activity that particular orientations to reading and writing were being developed in those contexts. To examine these sites from a literacy as situated social practices perspective, I drew on an extended theoretical framework, including a more extensive engagement with details of literacy learning and acquisition from a social practices perspective.

I worked more closely with theoretical perspectives on learning, cognition and development, than in previous chapters and applied these to my discussion of children's learning in pre-schools and in play activities. I drew on the resources of Vygotskian theories of learning as situated social activity to show the social, interactive, grounded and distributed nature of cognitive processes as they were applied to specific contexts of activity. I examined the multi-

⁵ The distinction between *phonological* awareness and *phonemic* awareness is sometimes blurred in its use. *Phonological* awareness is about sound awareness, while *phonemic* awareness is more print related, an awareness of sounds matching to phonemic units.

sourced and multi-semiotic resources for meaning-making and identity on which these children drew.

I showed that local 'ways of knowing' (Heath, 1983) are themselves simultaneously enmeshed in wider influences from outside the local. In particular, the way children drew on mass media and modelled images and resource for each other, provided an important insight in understanding children's early literacy learning. The children's play that I analyzed can be seen in Bakhtin's (1981) terminology as a space of productive heteroglossia (multiple meanings) where children's meaning-making resources and identity work were given room for intertextual creativity. In their play they mediated and modeled semiotic resources, values and practices from school, local and popular culture, religion, mass media and home. In contrast, in the first pre-school study I examined here, there was variety in the mix of narratives and resources from western and African children's rhymes, from syncretic religious sources and from the mass media, but no exercising of the children's own meaning-making resources. In the second study, the predominance of regulative concerns over pedagogic concerns meant that the development of children's capacities as meaning-makers in the context of literacy and drawing were backgrounded. In the third example, the intention for more multi-modal and hands-on engagement by children was confounded by the teacher's regulative discourse, which set up a restrictive (and inconsistent) framework as to what counted as acceptable ways of making and taking meaning from texts and other semiotic resources.

These studies have demonstrated the value of studying children's early childhood literacy practices through the lens of the social practices approach to the study of literacy. I was able to show the interactive, participatory, cognitively and socially distributed nature of children's early engagements with literacy and other semiotic modalities. I also described the effects of power and institutional dynamics in shaping such developments in formal settings. I drew attention to the large gap between what children are creatively able to achieve in unstructured settings, as well as the failure of the institutions studied to productively engage children as active learners. In addressing the limits of the institutional literacy practices that I identified, literacy pedagogies are recommended which recognize children as active and creative learners. Dyson's (1993) model of the 'permeable curriculum' is worthy of attention. She urges teachers to allow children to draw on their resources and experiences from out of school, and to use other media besides talk and print, including drawing and dramatic play, as they learn how the written media work, and what social possibilities it allows, for example, for fulfilling the requirements of the official curriculum, for representing their imagined

worlds, and for connecting with friends, as well as with family. In such classrooms the classroom is the space for an “expanded activity” (Engestrom, 1999, Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López and Tejeda, 1999, 287) where hybridity and diversity are viewed as important cultural resources in children’s development, where the activity system is extended and the activity itself reorganized, resulting in new opportunities for learning.

In contrast to Dyson’s permeable curricula, it is sometimes claimed that teachers do not have the training to see and draw on diversity and difference (Freebody et al, 1995; Bloch and Prinsloo, 1999; Bloome and Green, 1992; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Micaels, 1986) Children are often described as learning a narrow capacity to produce a ‘successful lesson’ with the teacher, where such a lesson consists of a cue/response exercise, with children showing their competencies within a narrow range (Ferreiro, 1992). This was indeed the case in the institutions studied in chapter six.

It is interesting, finally, to note that while children in this study were learning how to distinguish and combine various resources, such as singing, drawing, mime, and the potential of various things, their schooling mostly teaches children to use just one: written language. Kress (1997) and Lemke (1997) have suggested that this needs to change if we are to help students develop sophisticated multimedia literacies that have value in the contemporary world where new communications technologies have such influence.

In chapter eight I set out a preliminary approach to the question of how these ‘new literacies’ of computer-based and internet-based communication might be studied from the perspective of a social practices approach to the study of literacy. I use this study to show how one might start to apply the resources developed and outlined in this thesis to an important field of study in the South African context.

New directions in the application of the social practices approach to literacy in South Africa

Chapter Eight: The study of digital literacies as situated social practice

In this concluding chapter I outline a social practices approach to the study of screen-based and Internet-based reading and writing practices associated with Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). The reading and writing practices of these electronic communications media are a critical case for the social practices approach in contemporary times. Firstly, as I discuss in more detail below, the social practices perspective has stressed the social dimensions of literacy rather than the technical, whereas the technological aspects of these new media are, no doubt, crucial in their rise to importance. Secondly, and more importantly, the social practices approach has been concerned with studies of literacy as situated social practice whereas the ‘new literacies’ are said to be translocal (Blommaert, 2002, 11). Castells (2000) describes them as transnational vehicles for the flows of information of the globalised business, politics and culture of the new millennium. It has been argued that a literacy studies perspective which is based on localized ethnographic enquiry lacks a wider or holistic view from which local events can be read translocally (Luke, 2004; Brandt and Clinton, 2002; Collins and Bot, 2003). One might then ask whether a social practices approach has reached a limiting point, if a concern with the embedded, situated and interactive nature of literacy in social practice is not appropriate for the study of reading and writing which is said to be technologically based and context free. I make the case, however, that the ‘new literacies’ should indeed be studied as located, in their uses and effects, and thus argue for the ongoing relevance of the social practices approach to reading and writing in the electronic media. This discussion is preliminary in nature, draws on a small body of data, and is concerned to offer an outline as to how this work might productively be taken forward. It provides an appropriate ending to my larger study in that it illustrates that the social practices approach to literacy in South Africa is an ongoing and productive field of research and engagement in the field of education. I first summarise the arguments and findings of my study up to this point.

Literacy as situated social practice

At the beginning of this thesis I summarized the conceptual and methodological orientations of the social practices approach to the study of literacy as it had been developed and applied by scholars internationally. In broadest outline, such an approach studied literacy as social practice that varied across settings. Literacy was studied as an activity that could be described in terms of the literacy practices which people draw upon in literacy events. Literacy events were described as instances of reading and writing activity, or social activity that included reading and writing in some way. Literacy practices were described as the situated, socio-culturally shaped and particular ways that people talk about and engage in reading and writing activities. Literacy was therefore seen as being always situated literacy practices, which involve versions or revisions of established, socio-culturally shaped and specific ways of 'doing' reading and writing in certain social settings. Dominant and marginal approaches to reading and writing in particular settings were influenced by their relationship to specific forms of co-participation, conflict and contests over power and resources in particular settings.

I then applied the social practices to the study of literacy, and reviewed its application, in selected socially and educationally relevant sites in South Africa. Using a 'critical case study' format, I studied and modelled particular instances of a social practices approach to the study of literacy in South Africa. Through empirical study as well as engagement with a wider literature, I elaborated on this approach and its application to specific contexts and questions.

Firstly, I addressed the question of large numbers of adults in South Africa who had received little or no schooling and were designated as 'illiterate'. I showed how a programme of research (the SoUL project) studied the everyday literacy practices of various people in their local settings, many of whom would be classified 'illiterate' in policy discourses. The research showed literacy's incorporation in complex and variable ways in situated, located human activities, rooted in the everyday social practices of people as they engaged with other people, individually and collectively, as well as with institutions and projects. From that perspective, I argued that many of the assumptions about literacy, in educational and policy development circles, in academic discourse, and in policy proposals in South Africa at that time were wrong, in that they saw literacy as unitary, and as an independent variable that could be applied with predictable effects across contexts for social progress, cognitive development, democracy and economic take-off. Instead, the SoUL research found that reading and writing activities took place in

complex, often shared, ways that contradicted that view of literacy as uniform and context independent.

The SoUL research studied the situated and variable *uses* of reading and writing in everyday practice, how textual practices were used and were part of everyday life, given multiple meanings and located relevance, in contrast to a focus on how texts mean or how literacy has consequences in a decontextualized way. Whereas the SoUL research was largely about literacy as everyday practice, mostly amongst people with little or no schooling, it lacked a theoretical perspective to explain how these practices came to take the form and status that they did, as regards the influences upon them from outside the immediate settings that were studied.

In addressing that shortcoming, I pointed out at the beginning of chapter two that the concept of social practices could be seen as holding a particular conceptual importance in contemporary social theory. Specific structure or order is given to social institutions or social fields by the ways people think, act and interact, and such human activity is simultaneously structured by social dynamics, such that it cannot be said that the one precedes the other. Social networks or practices in their historical variability consist not only of human beings and their intersubjective relationships, but also simultaneously of objects, classifications and categories that are necessary components of a social practice (Latour, 1993). Such a perspective helped me to study the ways in which networked literacy practices from outside have effect on the construction of local practices, in both historical as well as contemporary examples. Literacy practices were not simply the products of local activity but involved rather the particular local application of communication technologies, language and artefacts that originated from outside the immediate social space. However, local applications involved original and varied uses of those resources.

My overall point of departure in the historical analysis was that print literacy did not come as a unitary package but rather came embedded in a range of specific practices, relationships and artefacts. These practices were very much shaped by European experiences and interests but were subject to interpretation, translation, recontextualization and re-embedding in a range of localized ways by indigenous people as well as by relocated Europeans. By way of a case study approach, I showed that Europeans took assumptions as to the private ownership and alienability of land with them when they travelled and asserted the universality of their own practices, underwritten by texts. I showed that the written documents of land purchase had no leverage over local knowledge until such time that the network of practices and arrangements that sustained such

local knowledge had been supplanted, usually by force and conquest. I further addressed the claims of ‘great divide’ theories of literacy that literacy in itself has predictable consequences associated with European civilization in my study of early exchanges between Europeans and Africans around the Bay of Natal. I showed that literacy was subject to varying and at least partial appropriation, redefinition and translation by local people, as well as by European people when they were effectively relocated by their partial severance from European practices.

I established that text-based reading and writing practices (or print literacy) were one amongst several forms of sign-based meaning-making activities, which all used particular material technologies to make socially recognizable meanings. However, print literacy had a particular value, in its connections to strategies of power and status, and in its historical links with expanding Christianity in Europe, firstly, and then elsewhere. Europeans presented it, and used it, as a defining form of communicative practice, which distinguished western from other forms of social organization. Not just a communicative resource, this ‘literacy’ was itself a sign and a social category that signaled insider and outsider status, within larger networked practices and discourses that detailed linked divides, between Christian civilization and others. It was that indexical function which was subverted by some African leaders in my study, when they asserted that it was they who would decide what held status in their domain, as well as to what uses text-based literacy should be put. I argued that literacy as a social technology and communicative resource for the organizing of human activity has local effect in ways that are shaped by the complex dynamics of power and value that operate at multiple levels.

I turned my focus to children’s early childhood literacy in the context of concerns about widespread failures and drop-outs of children in South African schools. I paid closer attention to the dynamics of *learning* in relation to situated literacies than was the case in the adult-related studies already covered in this thesis. Attention to children’s development of their early sign-making and meaning-making resources and practices revealed the multiple semiotics and modalities in their activities and productions. I found, at the educational sites that I studied, that strategies for teaching children to read and write were interwoven and frequently displaced or dominated by concerns with regulation of children and the structuring and production of authority. I argued that the literacy activities were a particular kind of literacy, in each case only tenuously linked to reading and writing practices outside of school. The teachers at each site were shown to have invented the activity of literacy teaching differently, despite following the same

broad curricula. Children at each site most likely took differing orientations to literacy and meaning-making resources away with them into the first years of schooling. My study of early childhood play examined the argument that children bring sense-making strategies to communication events and actively make sense of their worlds, developing their meaning making resources through such activity. I focused on the multiple semiotics of children involved in such play. I showed children modelling and mediating for each other a range of resources and attitudes. I argued on the basis of this analysis, in ways that related to my earlier argument in chapters three and four, that it is necessary to take account of how local “ways of knowing” (Heath, 1983) are themselves simultaneously enmeshed in wider influences from outside the local. Local knowledge includes complex forms of engagement with regional, national and global resources and values. As an example, children that I studied drew on mass media and modelled for each other ways of appropriating and identifying with texts and images from media and popular cultural sources beyond the immediately local. I thus identified in particular sites of study how situated literacy practices are shaped by wider social dynamics, but that there is an indeterminacy as to how these influences are manifest in social activity in situated contexts.

Methodological and conceptual dimensions of a social practices approach to literacy

Following the theoretical and methodological orientations of the New Literacy Studies, or the 'social practices' approach to literacy I studied literacy as a social activity that could best be described in terms of the literacy practices which people draw upon in literacy events. Literacy events are instances of reading and writing activity. Literacy is always located literacy practices, or established but context-specific ways of 'doing' reading and writing in certain social settings.

Ethnographic enquiry across multiple sites produced evidence of substantial variety and specificity in the ways reading and writing were embedded in social practices. Such variety and specificity was explained by way of the claim that literacy, like language, is always intrinsically contexted, contested, socially consequential, and historically located with regard to the experiences of individuals and groups that have shaped and that use those literacy and linguistic practices. I argued and provided research evidence that literacy practices were embedded in specific forms of co-participation, conflict and contests over power and resources in particular settings, and that consequently there was a social and political dimension to the particular forms and functions that reading and writing took in specific contexts. This is not to say that the forms and functions that reading and writing had in specific cases were simply a reflection of the power

dynamics between contesting social groups in a specific context, or that they could be read off as such. Nor that local literacy practices in specific cases were simply the products of locally situated actors. The forms and functions which appeared self-evident to the actors in specific contexts were shown to be products of a social process that combined elements of inherited, or unexamined assumptions about literacy, together with located and motivated revisions of those assumptions. These sometimes unstable and internally contradictory concepts and processes involved cultural responses to contemporary contexts as perceived by the actors, and as influenced by institutional processes. I showed that the understanding of literacy as *text-based* communication holds a particular but shifting status as compared to other communicative modalities, for historical reasons. This status is increasingly unstable but continues to be strong, in educational contexts like schooling, in particular.

I draw on these arguments, findings and insights, and demonstrate their applicability in my analytical outline for a study of the ‘new literacies’ that concludes my thesis.

The ‘new literacies’¹

It is commonplace now to claim that new reading and writing practices have resulted from the uses of computers and the Internet. These ‘new literacies’ of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) have variously been labelled as technoliteracies (Lankshear and Snyder, 2000), digital literacy (Gilster, 1997), electronic literacies (Warschauer, 1999), silicon literacies (Snyder, 2002) and multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000)². Changes are said to have occurred in the forms and practices of literacy associated with changes in technology, the media, work and the economy (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996; Snyder, 1998; Snyder and Beavis, 2004). Where the ‘old literacies’ are print-based, paper-based and language-based, reading and writing associated with the ‘new literacies’ are seen to integrate written, oral and audiovisual modalities of interactive human communication within screen-based and networked electronic systems. Graphic resources such as pictures and diagrams are said to have increasingly moved to front-

¹ I use the phrase ‘new literacies’ as a shorthand way to talk, in a generalized way, about the literacy practices related to the use of the media of screen-based and Internet-based communication. There are undoubtedly problems to do with using such a general term, in a context-independent way, but the same problem applies to the term *literacy*.

² I limit my discussion here to the ‘new literacies’ as linked to the technologies of computers, the Internet and the ‘world-wide web’. I note, though, that others talk about the ‘new literacies’ as not being only technology-based. For example, Lankshear and Knobel (2002, 4) include scenario planning, understood as has emerged during the past 40-50 years as a generic technique to stimulate thinking about the future in the context of strategic planning.

stage, imparting information directly, rather than providing backup for knowledge that is text-based (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Kress, 1997; Kress, 2001). Lemke argued that meanings in multimedia are not fixed or additive, in the way word-meaning and picture-meanings relate. Rather, they are multiplicative, where word-meaning is modified by image-context, and image-meaning in turn is modified by textual context (Lemke, 1997, 287). Readers of the 'new literacies' must organise their reading across a range of media, flexible constructs, and typologies that break from traditional grammar orthodoxies (Kress, 1997; Healy, 2000)

The new communications technologies allow multimedia texts to be widely distributed almost at once and are seen as providing access for some people to previously unimagined resources of data, knowledge and entertainment. These technological developments associated with the 'new literacies' include the linking up of huge numbers of computers across continents so as to allow their users to communicate without substantial time-lags, or in 'real time' (Castells, 2000). This connectivity makes possible a level of economic and social integration at a world level that would have been impossible otherwise. It allows 'real-time' financial transactions at a global level, allowing centralization of control of enterprises and decentralization of operations, through computer-facilitated network relations.

What is not settled is how these 'new literacies' are to be understood from the perspectives of how they work, how they are distributed, and how they are best engaged, including in educational contexts. Many studies of the 'new literacies' write about them with largely one context in mind, that of middle-class, usually American, European, Australian or Asian contexts, but that context is assumed rather than explicit. When contextual issues are backgrounded or ignored, or when particular contexts are treated as if they are universal, then, as I have argued earlier, understandings of literacy tend to become more technical in nature. Under such conditions, the 'new literacies', as well as the 'old literacies', are treated either as simply the product of skills acquired by the writer or as the point of departure for different skills to be acquired and exercised by the reader. These skills are treated as something externally given, for the learner to 'acquire' and utilize. The focus in literacy studies, and particularly in educational contexts then becomes those skills, and the disabilities and obstacles to which would-be users thereof are subject. I develop an argument in this chapter that the 'new literacies' work in particular ways in low technology and socially distinctive African contexts, and that the ways that they work there illuminate the ways that they work more generally. Their workings are widely obscured by much

that is taken for granted in discussions of the ‘new literacies’ in high technology and Western contexts. I draw on the earlier conceptual analysis and empirical studies of this thesis in this chapter, and extend that analysis into the present examination of how the ‘new literacies’ might be productively engaged with from a social practices perspective.

Skills-based perspectives on the ‘new literacies’

My discussion here is concerned with developing a preliminary perspective for the study of the ‘new literacies’ which addresses the neglected issue of context, and social inequality within and across contexts, in relation to the ‘new literacies’. Implicit in many discussions of the ‘new literacies’ is a model of social consensus and assumptions of social parity at the macro-social level which has the effect of backgrounding and obscuring conceptual issues. This is apparent in many studies of the ‘new literacies’ that focus on individual and cognitive dimensions. For example, (Leu et al 2004, 15) identify the key ‘new literacies’ as

- using a search engine effectively to locate information;
- evaluating the accuracy and utility of information that is located on a webpage in relation to one’s purpose;
- using a word processor effectively, including using functions such as checking spelling accuracy, inserting graphics, and formatting text;
- participating effectively in bulletin board or listserv discussions to get needed information;
- knowing how to use e-mail to communicate effectively; and
- inferring correctly the information that may be found at a hyperlink on a webpage.

This list implies that the ‘new literacies’ are core skills of an operational and generalisable nature. But the recurring word ‘effectively’ in the various examples, and the word ‘correctly’ in the last example, tell us little about what might be going on in each case. The crucial point here, which I elaborate on in this chapter, is that effectiveness and correctness are not contained or explained within a skills-based approach, and can thus only be asserted with reference here to some vague background of social consensus as to what constitutes effectiveness and correctness³.

³ The social consensus that Leu et al seem to assume in their discussion is explicitly stated at one point, where, quoting Banton-Smith, they presents a perspective of evolutionary progress from the ‘old literacies’ to the ‘new literacies’, against a background model of benign national development, where “the story of American reading is a fascinating one to pursue.... It is a story which reflects the changing religious, economic, and political institutions of a growing and progressive country.... This evolutionary progress...” (Leu et al, 2004, 4)

Leu et al's view of the 'new literacies' is consistent with their view on the 'old literacies' which they refer to as "skill sets" that include "phonemic awareness, word recognition, decoding knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, inferential reasoning, the writing process, spelling, response to literature" (Leu et al, 2004, 15), in a hierarchy and taxonomy of decontextualized skills and knowledge. For Leu et al these core competencies of the 'old literacies' and 'new literacies' are massively productive gateway skills. However, as I have argued already, such lists of context-neutral skills are a problem because they treat as given the processes of signification and meaning-making involved, which on closer examination, turn out to be considerably more complex and variable than the skills lists suggest.

The study of literacy as situated social practice, socio-linguistics and integrational semiotics

The research orientation I have applied and developed in this thesis involves the study of practices in a detailed way so as to identify the distinctiveness of literacy under different social conditions. Studies of literacy as situated social practice pay attention to the range of multiple contexts in which persons who are engaged in sign-based, communicative activity are situated. As I have shown in previous chapters, reading and writing, in whatever modality, appear as not exactly the same thing, in their uses, functions, modes of acquisition and status across groups of people and across specific social domains within societies. Socially located individuals draw on particular sets of perceptual, cognitive and cultural procedures and resources to make and take meanings from texts. As I argued in particular in chapters six and seven with reference to children's early literacy practices, literacies, cannot be understood as passive receptivities. That is, reading 'effectively' and 'correctly' (as in Leu et al, 2004, cited earlier) does not involve just decoding of words and letters but also the practices of 'seeing through' the representational resources of the texts to make sense in particular ways, which vary across social settings. As I have shown in preceding chapters, in historical encounters where different meanings and uses were taken and made from literacy, and in the examples of children's play, as well as in the variety of classroom-based orientations, there is a necessary indeterminacy in the meanings taken and made in any textual interchange, and reading, as much as writing is an active, interactive and situated process of meaning making.

Such a perspective as it relates to multiplicity of meanings sits well with studies of the 'new literacies' which stress the multiplicity of routes and meanings that can be taken from web-sites and screens, where readers can choose to follow links as they want (Snyder, 1997; Lemke, 1997).

My argument draws attention to the social and situated nature of that variability described by Lemke. The signs of communication (spoken, written, visual, gestural, artefactual) are also and always signs of social value. Bourdieu (1991, 55) made this same case with reference to ‘linguistic markets’ whereby linguistic differences (e.g., of dialect, pronunciation, vocabulary in a common language) in their social uses reproduce the system of social differences, so that particular competencies function as “linguistic capital, producing a *profit of distinction* on the occasion of each social exchange”. In a related example Blommaert (2002) analyzed the forms of written English used in a letter to him by a young Malawian woman. He argued that in her written English, she displayed what was an expensive resource in her context. But her departures from ‘good English’ would make her language-use a cheap resource in the European context where the letter was received. Blommaert used this example to illustrate his use of Hymes’s (1966) theorization of the relativity of linguistic function. As Blommaert summarized: “Even if language forms are similar or identical, the way in which they get inserted in social actions may differ significantly and consequently there may be huge differences in what these (similar or identical) forms *do* in real societies” (Blommaert, 2002, 3). By extension, we can start to think about the new media in similar kinds of ways, as carrying social capital in situated ways within specific social economies, and as working in particular and variable ways depending on how they are, as Blommaert says, “inserted in social actions”.

One of the corollaries of such a situatedness of signs and media as regards their social functions, is that the act of writing, on screen or in print, may have significance in itself, *irrespective of what is written down* (as was the case with Shaka’s squiggles on paper in Isaac’s presence, described in chapter four). In cases where writing and reading (in old and ‘new literacies’, and in languages of status and authority) are accomplishments restricted to a particular group of people, evidence of such accomplishments in themselves acquire the status of social and political signs in their own right. The reverse is also the case, where no status advantage falls to people outside that group. For such people as those unschooled adults described in the SoUL study in chapter three, their illiteracy remained a defining social characteristic despite their reading and writing activities.

The argument I have developed in this thesis concerns the socially mediated and situated basis of sign-based practices. Signs, and forms of signification, don’t have an autonomous effect which automatically applies outside the context which gave rise to them. The red warning triangle in

Harris's (2000) example that is stored under a car-seat does not function as a sign in that context. It is only a sign when placed on a road next to a stationary vehicle. Signs do not remain 'the same' from one context to another. Applied to texts, including multi-media texts, the point is that the meaning of a text is not static, or irrevocably embedded in the text itself. Its meaning is dependent upon its readers' *uses of the text*. What might look like the same multimedia text on screen is not functionally the same in a different setting. It follows different meaning conventions, and requires different skills for its successful use, when it functions in different social contexts for different purposes, as part of different human activities.

Computers as signs of social indexicality

The following transcribed interaction, which I analyse in condensed overview, demonstrates aspects of the above discussion. It was recorded in a study of the literacy practices in a Cape Town factory that assembled shock absorbers for the international motor vehicle industry (Scholtz and Prinsloo, 2001). The conversation was between a team leader and a shop steward. The workplace had been designed as a 'high performance' workplace under the pressure of international competition and under the influence of new management texts, which argue that flattened management hierarchies, self-directed work teams, empowered workers and partnerships with workers all give competitive edge to such restructured workplaces (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996). There had been a break-up of production and assembly work in this factory into relatively contained and self-monitoring cells or teams led by team leaders who were appointed from the ranks of the workers and trained extensively in team leading and team-building practices.

Team leader: You need a computer to do all your work, maybe a laptop. That will ensure that you do not lose the agenda, and so on.

Shop Steward: You see, we must look poor. We don't want a computer because we are poor. We want to show the bosses that we must do things the hard way, you see, comrade

Team leader: You are stupid, having a computer is part of being poor. (laughter from other delegates) It is not *kwaai* (glamorous) to have a pc today; it is part of the furniture.
(Scholtz and Prinsloo, 2001, 710)

The team leader was a new kind of 'shop-floor' worker, recruited and trained in leadership and quality control functions, and rewarded for showing loyalty and commitment to the production enterprise (Scholtz and Prinsloo, 2001). The shop steward, on the other hand, invoked earlier

workplace practices and relationships, where adversarial relationships between workers and management were explicit and built into trade-union discourses and relations with management. The antagonism between these two positions fueled their exchange about the old and ‘new literacies’. While the discussion was first framed as simply a question about the efficiencies of computers in relation to older writing technologies, it was, undoubtedly, more complex. The team leaders’ embracing of the efficiencies of computerization were inseparable from their embracing of the new industrial relations order. While the team leaders still recognized the broad notion of working class identity (‘being poor’) they were in fact part of a new working class elite, enjoying relatively well-paid, demanding jobs, in an environment where unemployment and serious poverty were widespread (Scholtz and Prinsloo, 2001). For the shop steward it was not the functionality of the computers which was the issue. It was rather how they pointed to larger social relations (“You see, we must look poor. We don’t want a computer because we are poor.”) For the team leader, it was a question of efficiency, but his identification of his position as progressive and the shop steward’s as backward was an ideological one, shaped by his embracing of the values, attitudes and overall commitments of the new workplace and the work order (Scholtz and Prinsloo, 2001; Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996).

This workplace conversation featured computers as signs around which differences asserted themselves, and illustrates that these media work in contextualized ways. The conversation just discussed echoes in the following argument amongst Grade One children, recorded as part of the CELL project, that I discussed in chapters six and seven. The transcript presents an informal classroom conversation between three seven-year old children in their first year of schooling, in Khayelitsha township, Cape Town.⁴

Vuyiswa: KungoLwesibini namhlanje. Akuyiwa kwicomputer? (It’s Tuesday today. Aren’t we going to the computer?)

Thulethu: Abangasibhatalanga ischool fees abayi ecomputeni. (Those who haven’t paid school fees are not going to the computers)

Masibulele: Niza kubona xa inini abangasibhatalanga ischool fees thina sibe sisibhatele noba kukulo nyaka uzayo. (You’ll see when you are the ones who haven’t paid school fees and we have paid even if it is next year.)

⁴ Masibulele is the same child whose play activities were a focus of study in chapter seven.

Thulethu: Into endiyaziyo eyasekhaya imali ininzi. (What I know is that we have a lot of money at home.)

Masibulele: Xa ininzi kutheni ungahlali esiteneni uhlala ehokini? (If you have a lot why are you not staying in a brick house, why are you staying in a shack?)

Masibulele: Niqhayisa ngecomputer. Nizakubona kulonyaka uzayo. Kuyaqalelwa ukubhatalwa ischool fees. (You are bragging about computers. You'll see next year. We all have to start afresh paying school fees.)

Thulethu: Okusalayo aniyi kwicomputers. (The fact remains you are not going to computers.)

Masibulele: Nizakubona kulonyaka uzayo. (You'll see next year.)

Again we see differences of a social sort being asserted in relation to computers, which have to do with how these computers are inserted into the social action that features in this particular setting. Children at this state school whose parents had not paid their school fees were held back from going to computer classes. This was because the school administration wanted to put pressure on their parents to pay up. While state schools are allowed to charge fees, schools are forbidden by the state from turning children away for unpaid fees. The computers in this case were not provided by the state but were a donation from a business foundation, which the school management had solicited. The school management thus saw itself as having discretionary control over these valued resources and attempted to use access to computers as a lever to get parents to pay up on children's school fees. When asked by their teachers to compare the school with neighbouring schools, the children identified the presence of computers as something which marked their school as better than the others, which did not have them.

The girl Masibulele was teased in the extract above by the boy Thulethu, who took advantage of her exclusion from access to this high status resource, to 'bring her down'. She responded by undermining his claims of family wealth, pointing out that he lived in a shack. But the boy's attack on her was only blunted ("The fact remains you are not going to computers"). Access to computers was thus clearly an index of social status in this exchange, where the computers were a sign that was linked to discourses about wealth and its social display.

Computers in local contexts

While it is apparent that the computers were valued by the children it does not follow that they engaged with them similarly to the children in the USA that are the implicit users in Leu et al's (2004) discussion. The problem with not thinking of the 'new literacies' as situated resources can be seen in studies which assume a generalisability from middle-class American or European

contexts to elsewhere. For example, writers in the USA as well as Australia (Reinking, McKenna, Labbo and Kieffer, 1998; Green and Bigum, 1993; Luke, 2000) argue that children's literacy activities involving computers prior to and outside of school are typically more frequent, richer, and more meaningful than are such activities they encounter when they enter elementary school. Clearly this contrast between in-school and out-of-school experiences with the new literacies only works when such digitally-rich out-of-school encounters with computers are available to children, which is not the case here.

In the school setting presented in the data above, the computers do not and cannot operate within the networks of assumptions, practices, artifacts and infrastructure that are taken for granted in mainstream settings in the USA and elsewhere. The following description, of one computer class with six year-old pre-school children at the same school, is illustrative of this point.

The children wait outside the computer room. The children go in. The school has 20 computers in the lab. The children are told to put their hands under the table. The teacher selects a 'pre-reading' programme and calls it up on all the computers. There are 8 balloons, numbered and in a bunch on the screen, and below that a key consisting of numbers in squares from one to ten and below each number the name of a colour. The children can change the colour of the balloons by clicking on the number-colour key.

The teacher asks the children to click on the 1/Red button at the bottom of the screen. One child I observe, Sesethu, holds the mouse and moves the cursor to number one. She places it there but does not click. The children seem confused. The teacher revises the names and places of colours in the sequence again, in case the children do not know the colours by name. He then tells them to click on number 1/Red again. Sesethu says she has clicked, but hasn't. The teacher asks them to find balloon number one and click on it. The teacher comes to Sesethu and her friend and shows them where the click button is. The teacher first asks them to identify the two number ones in the balloons. They identify them and click on them. The balloons become red. The teacher says there isn't a number 2 on the balloons. He asks what number comes after number 2? Learners say "three". Teacher asks, "What colour is number 3?" The learners say "blue". The teacher asks them to click on number 3. Sesethu identifies number 3 and clicks on it. It turns blue. Teacher says "good", and asks for the children's attention. The teacher asks the class to look on the board. He says, "Our four looks like this (he writes a four on the board) and their four looks like 4. It is the same thing. Now first click on the yellow and then find the 4 in the balloons". Sesethu clicks on four but it turns blue. The teacher comes over and says they must click on the four first. He helps her to click on number 4 (yellow) and then balloon number 4. The teacher says, "excellent!" The teacher explained in an aside to the researcher that this

was a very difficult exercise but a very good one. He said that it taught children fine-motor skills and eye-hand co-ordination. He said that the following term he planned to teach the children how to get in and out of a programme, but now they were started with pre-reading exercises.

It is clear from this description that the school was using what have been called 'first generation' skill-and-drill computer software, donated along with the computers. The teachers enthusiastically supported the use of this software because it was consistent with their own ideas about how reading as a basic skill should be taught. They understood literacy teaching as a drill and practice activity, similarly to the teachers encountered in chapter six, at Thembani Educare Centre and Sivile Pre-school. Their understandings incorporated local versions of the reading readiness and skill-based perspectives that came from the USA in the 1970s and 1980s and are widely subscribed to as part of local teachers' thinking as to what constitutes literacy and learning (Prinsloo and Stein, 2004). These assumptions about literacy and learning were consistent with the software the teachers had access to, which gave strong emphasis to skills-based *reading readiness* activities, as in the example above, providing hand-eye co-ordination exercises as well as fine and gross motor training activities for pre-school children, together with phonics-linked activities for children in the early primary school classes. Such software does not make use of, or introduce children to the networking and interactive features of the new media resources, which are said to be their key distinctive features (Luke, 2000; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). Children thus encounter ICTs in the context of the authority relations and pedagogical practices that characterize schooling in this setting. The enforced passivity of the children (for example, where they sat with their hands under the table while the teacher set up the lesson, and then followed limited procedures in mechanical fashion) is consistent with the way they were expected to behave in school, but contrasts sharply with the often declared potential of the ICTs for children's experimentation, self-instruction, individual choices and creativity (Luke, 2000; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2003). As regards the basic skills orientation to literacy learning, where literacy teaching in school tended to focus on letter names and sounds rather than on meaning-making, the emphasis in some contemporary approaches has shifted to greater emphasis on children's active engagement in reading and writing activities as communicative practices, rather than as basic processing skills (Hall, Larson and Marsh, 2003).

The teachers themselves were not secure in their knowledge or use of computers. Neither the teachers nor the children encountered computers in their everyday activities outside of school. There was a specialist teacher who worked across a number of schools in the area, and the class

teachers felt unable to take up computer-based classes in his absence. This situation first came to the researchers' attention when the class teacher came in to tell the researcher that she wanted to sort something out with the principal.

She says that the computer teacher does not come to school when it's her children's turn for computers. Her children haven't had computers for a month now. They love computers.

Later the upset teacher told the CELL researcher that she was cross with the computer teacher.

The problem now is that she does not have proof that the computer teacher didn't teach her children for a month. She was supposed to write down that he did not come because of this and that. Today the computer teacher is giving a computer lesson at S. Primary School in Khwezi knowing that he's got responsibility to teach her children today.

The details as to the complexities of how computers are used in this school that I have described here make clear what the problems are with initiatives that involve the insertion of resources into a context without attention as to how they will work in that setting.

Great divides, globalisation and particularity

As my above discussion of the school and computers suggests, computers or other media inserted in a particular setting, to bring about certain results, encounter situated social practices that do not necessarily result in these resources being used in a way that promotes social development and participation, as conceived by the implementers. This point is in direct contrast to some of the claims made by studies that follow 'digital divide' logic. The notion of a 'digital divide' is a familiar association when the new technologies and Africa feature in the same paragraph, and likewise when the new technologies and the underclasses of the USA or Europe are the focus.

..the availability and use of information and communication technology is a pre-requisite for economic and social development in our world. It is the functional equivalent of electricity in the industrial era... for those economies that are unable to adapt to the new technological system, their retardation becomes cumulative - as it happened in Africa. (Castells, 2000, 3)

In the USA, as in other cases, 'digital divide' logic is invoked when strategies for disseminating 'new literacies' skills are made. Leu et al al (2004, 9) describe how The No Child Left Behind Act, passed by the Federal Government in 2002 enacts a wide range of initiatives, many of which are designed to improve reading outcomes in schools, and with addressing inequalities in educational outcomes. They report that The Act has a section devoted to technology (Title II,

Section D), with the stated goal, “To assist every student in crossing the digital divide by ensuring that every student is technologically literate by the time the student finishes the eighth grade, regardless of the student’s race, ethnicity, gender, family income, geographic location, or disability.”. Researchers at the World Bank (1998, 1) have argued for the developmental potential of the new media networks: “This new technology greatly facilitates the acquisition and absorption of knowledge, offering developing countries unprecedented opportunities to enhance educational systems, improve policy formation and execution, and widen the range of opportunities for business and the poor”.

This logic around digital divides brings to mind the claims that were made about the ‘old literacies’, of print and paper, with regard to their cognitive and social consequences, that I have discussed at several places in this thesis, where it was claimed that there was a fundamental divide, both cognitively and socially between those who were literate and those who weren’t, that oral language had one set of features, written another, quite different from each other. ‘Great divide’ logic, as I have argued, assumes that literacy produces the same social and cognitive changes, because of its intrinsic characteristics, no matter who learns to read and write, and no matter where or when literacy emerges. The strategy that such thinking suggested for the ‘old literacy’, as I discussed it in chapter two, was the assumption that a national programme would provide all citizens with equal access to these powerful resources, and, thus, equal opportunity for upward social mobility and economic prosperity. However, as I have shown, following Street (1984) such decontextualized understandings of how literacies work involve a form of technological determinism, reducing the diversity of socio-cultural life-forms to a one-dimensional scale.

Such arguments about ‘great divide’ logic in relation to the ‘old literacies’ suggest a cautionary approach to the study of the ‘new literacies’ in terms of a ‘digital divide’. It is abundantly clear that the capacity of the Internet is distributed highly unevenly throughout the world, with real consequences (Miller, 2001; Stavrou, May and Benjamin, 2000; bridges. org, 2003, 6). The problem with ‘digital divide’ thinking, though, is that it encourages simple digital solutions, along the lines that ‘great divide’ thinking as regards reading and writing proposed solutions that focused on getting people exposed to basic techniques of coding speech and decoding print, without adequate attention to the way these limited skills were embedded in wider ways of social and individual being. In illustration, the World Bank and UNESCO have been enthusiastic over

the idea of ‘telecentres’ in African villages and centres, with an Internet-linked computer providing a multi-function resource. Much of the research into these centres has shown disappointing results, however, with many such telecentres used for telephonic communication with friends and families and for preparing job applications rather than using the Internet for anything else. (Etta and Parvyn-Wamahiu, 2003; Stavrou, May and Benjamin, 2000). However, from a literacy as social practice perspective, such findings make complete sense. One would expect people to use those resources that they think are functional in their context, and the assumption that the Internet has a functionality that is the same everywhere is mistaken, as I have already argued with regard to computers.

The ‘new literacies’ and globalization

Discussions about the ‘digital divide’ are commonly accompanied by references to ‘globalization’ as a new form of social organization that is world-wide and with real consequences. The ‘global view’ on globalization is that of a radically new form of capitalist, socio-economic organization that arose in the later decades of the last century and is world dominating in its influences and effects (Castells, 2000). Globalization is fundamentally new, in the theoretical perspective presented in the work of Castells, because it is toolled by new information and communication technologies. This information-technological revolution makes possible new forms of production and organizational forms, resulting in a global economy where capital markets are interconnected world-wide and where multinational corporations, in manufacturing, services, and finance constitute the core of the world economy. The global economy relies on a technological infrastructure of telecommunications, information systems, microelectronic-based manufacturing and processing, as well as information-based travel and transport systems. These allow the core activities of the economy to work as a unit in real time on a planetary scale.

While it provides an elegant account, a non-deterministic de-centred model of globalization such as that of Castell’s (2000) does not deal with the complexity and detail of situated processes. The environment inevitably gets homogenized in the attempt to make sense of the complexities of an emergent whole. That was the same criticism that I made in chapter four, concerning views on colonialism as an overarching concept, where I argued that colonialism did not arrive as a unitary package in the southern African settings that I studied, nor was received as such but rather was embedded in a variety of situated, contexts, networks, artefacts, relationships, assumptions and

practices. The global perspectives on colonialism and globalization can be described in Law and Mol's (2002, 4) terms as those of 'romantic complexity', or 'looking up', where the global conjures up an image of a reality that it is complex and large scale. 'Looking up' is a sense-making process that identifies a number of different elements, and then shows how they relate to produce a complex reality which, while abstract, makes a larger and higher sense of the parts. Globalization, in this view, is a reality that is qualitatively different from its component parts; and it can only be grasped if we look at the whole, at a level of abstraction. As Law and Mol (2002) suggest, we can also 'look down' to look at globalization, and it then becomes something different. By 'looking down' we make an effort to understand local cultural processes, meanings and symbolic processes, in a way that is sensitive to local variation. This does not at all mean that we stop thinking of larger processes of economic exploitation and historical change, rather that we stop thinking of them in a holistic and decontextualized way. In this lens, the global is specific. "It changes shape and size when it travels, and it travels only uncertainly" (Law and Mol, 2002, 4). In other words, if one 'looks down' rather than 'up', the different and contending practices that come into view may not add up to a whole.

These critical perspectives on globalization and the 'digital divide' that I have pointed to here sit well with the social practices perspective as I have described it and developed it in earlier chapters.

Conclusion

My discussion here has drawn on the perspective on literacy as situated social practice to argue that *all* sign-based communicative activity, including those associated with the new electronic media, is shaped both by immediate interactive dynamics and by wider social and material practices. I have argued that the 'new literacies' don't have an intrinsic resourcefulness. Whether they offer opportunities for particular users is something that has to be established by situated research, not assumed. In the case of the school interactions and practices around computers and ICTs that I examined, I showed that 'digital divide' analyses and solutions by way of technology transfer are problematic. 'Digital divide' logic overemphasizes the importance of the physical presence of computers and connectivity to the exclusion of other factors that allow people to use electronic media for meaningful ends. The question then arises as to how educators and researchers should respond to turn such situations around so that children are not actively disadvantaged by such encounters with the 'new literacies' as I have described above, in relation

to children who encounter them differently. I suggest that there is a lot of descriptive and analytic work still to be done to come to grips with the dynamic relationships between the new media, in their complexities and potential, and the activities of real, situated, embodied and socially engaged people. My analysis points out a direction for one line of further work that can be pursued as part of the larger project of developing the approach to literacy as situated social practice.

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Appendix

The Social Uses of Literacy (SoUL) Research Reports were edited by Catherine Kell and published jointly by the Centre for Adult & Continuing Education (CACE), University of the Western Cape and the Department of Adult Education & Extra-Mural Studies, University of Cape Town, in 1996. 200 copies of these Reports were distributed to colleagues and to libraries.

The Reports were:

Liezl Malan, 'Literacy and social position in Newtown'. Research Report No: 2.

Mignonne Breier and Lynette Sait, 'Literacy, communication and worker health in a Cape factory'. Research Report No: 3.

Diana Gibson, 'Farm workers, literacy and literacy practices in the Bree River Valley'. Research Report No: 4.

Catherine Kell, "'It's all right when we're alone": Insider/outsider literacies in an informal settlement in the Cape Peninsula. Research Report No: 5.

Mignonne Breier, Matsepela Taetsane and Lynette Sait, 'Reading and writing in the minibus taxi industry'. Research Report No: 6.

Liezl Malan, 'Literacies of school and everyday life in Bellville South'. Research Report No: 7.

Kathy Watters, 'A weak belly or a strong backbone: a study of the communicative practices of the service staff of a school'. Research Report No: 8.

Ammon China & Steven Robins, "'I read Xhosa books in prison, but here outside I don't read ***-all": Local and bureaucratic literacies in a Cape Town squatter settlement'. Research Report No: 9.

Steven Robins, 'Local literacies, school knowledge and the brokering of legal discourses in Namaqualand'. Research Report No 10.

Mary-Jane McEwan & Liezl Malan, "'The kind of education I have, one cannot see": Perceptions and uses of literacy in rural Eastern Cape'. Research Report No: 11.